

BALLOONS over BRISTOL 13



SPECIAL SEX ISSUE

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BALLOONS OVER BRISTOL 13

This seriously sinister 13th issue of Balloons Over Bristol, was originally meant to be the all sex special issue (or was it the all special sex issue?) until Pete Crump decided his sex article was far too racy to see print in public. But never mind, we do have an overdose of Amsterdam to boost the sexual content, a guarantee that this is a completely Viagra free product (we don't need it!), and a certain amount of Dr Who related material which - surely - must be all about sex really?

Our gloriously strange and black front cover comes from Sue Binfield, who sacrificed stencilling Tina's bathroom, going to the gym, washing her two cars and catching up with marketing campaigns for work to finish this in time for the deadline. Thanks, Sue!

This issue has been produced to the sounds of my washing machine and an assortment of the usual suspects (notably Nick Cave, Siouxsie & the Banshees and Garbage), and will be available for Novacon 28 in spite of distractions from Jane's firework's party, Smiles Best bitter, films too numerous to mention and exchanging e-mail with Doug!.

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Balloons Over Bristol 13 is available in exchange for fanzines, letters of comment, art, drink, wild theories about the nature of the universe, South Park videos, sex toys and crash space in Edinburgh from :

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November 1998

The One Where Christina Rants

Millenium rant

The TV series *Friends* seems to have caught some of the difference between the Americans and the Brits. Ross says "I love you," his English girlfriend replies with a cool "Thank You." One such defining moment for me on my recent US trip was a TV discussion about the millenium. It had a certain survivalist emphasis, reminiscent of the old cold war nuclear shelter: which cans of food to stock, what self-sufficient power source to invest in, how to keep granny wrapped up warm. But the weird part to my British ears was the final words of advice from the presenters. They said we should pray. Not a flippant suggestion, not a wry admission that they really did not know what would happen, but a serious recommendation. And then they did it. Right there and then, on the screen. They prayed. And it wasn't even a Sunday. Well, that's one thing that's never happened when we discuss the millenium bug at work.

There seems to be a certain amount of schizophrenia about the millenium (not to mention pedantry. We're not celebrating 2,000 years of anything significant - we're just marking the fact that our calendar is changing from years beginning in 19 to years beginning with 20. If you don't believe me, ask any millenium bug debugger). On the one hand, people are already getting party anxiety, frantically booking into any pub, restaurant, hotel or warm South facing country that will take them. On the other, there is a rising number of people who will need to be on standby to watch the numbers tick over on a process computer somewhere, deal with unforeseen consequences, work in bars to keep the millenium parties going, or guard their stash of used 20 pound notes, removed from the local cash machine in case of international banking system collapse. Who, I wonder, will be left to celebrate?

It certainly seems like we've created the millenium we deserve. The previous millenium was marked by prophecies of doom. The current one has engineered its own doom. The technology and the fictions on which our society is based are all going to be called into question, and this is a far more interesting prospect than which major European capital or Pacific island will be the coolest place to celebrate the millenium. And so far I've even managed to quell any incipient party angst I might be feeling with the thought that if all else fails I could always rustle up a few drinks and hold a party of my own.

Clinton rant

That millenium news item was a rare Monica-free moment for US TV. August in America was peak speculation season as the saga of *The Dress* unfolded. Even the Weather Channel was forecasting storms over The White House, *Star Trek* was edited to back-reference the event and HBO was able to do hour long cartoon reconstructions without commercial breaks. Well, that's what it felt like. The whole nation was so obsessed by the whole affair that there was an air of unreality about it, as if it were big-time showbiz gossip, Tommy Lee and Pamela Anderson writ large, rather than something with serious ramifications for the political discourse of their country. By comparison, the ongoing meltdown of the world's economic system hardly rated a mention. Maybe the planet's largest capitalist economy is in denial?

Well, at least the whole Clinton affair has had the effect of redefining adultery. Think of all those thousands of business men who've been kidding themselves for years that they haven't done anything wrong because they could honestly and truly swear they never stuck their willy inside another woman. On the other hand, I do have a bit of sympathy for the

Clinton view of the matter. There's less likely to be bad long term consequences like STDs or pregnancy if you come over the dress rather than inside the woman. Unless, of course, you're the President of the USA. Bill, I can't help thinking, would have been better off trying out the time-honoured expedient of a rubber.

Nova rant

When it comes to fanzines, I think I've been hanging out with Americans for far too long. This may be why I'm finding it difficult to pin down a fanzine I would like to vote for in the Novas. The question was raised briefly on RASSFUCK before being swallowed up in the group's customary torpor. No doubt, it has been done to death on newsgroups elsewhere but no-one's been kind enough to inform me of the answer yet. It's not that there haven't been good British fanzines this year. There was a crop of them at Corflu UK, for example. But compared to the big hitters like *Banana Wings* and *Plokta* they seem ephemeral. So, it's panning out to be a bit like Blur versus Oasis back in the mid-90s. Everyone knows these are the two biggest names out there, but who gives a fuck? *Banana Wings* is full of long articles by people pondering their perceptions of life, while *Plokta* generally has funny covers and no content. Maybe if Alison Scott could be transferred to *Banana Wings*, while Claire and Maureen are sent to kibbitz on *Plokta* we'd have, well, less pictures of babies, I suppose, and more of cats and wombats. I don't know, I guess I'd like to see the pizzazz of *Plokta* coupled to a less rambly version of *BW*, with a bit of controversy and fannish politicking thrown in for good measure.

But maybe that's not the British way. I have to agree with Paul Kincaid (well, someone has to!) that American fanzines seem more connected to some sense of fannish community than ours. And I don't just mean the unnerving way in which *crifanac* manages to announce deaths, marriages, strokes, illnesses, deferred operations and more deaths in the same relentlessly jolly tone. Or even the way people keep going on about the 50s. It's more that the fanzines seems to be written for a group of people who have fandom in common rather than an interest in science fiction, beer or vaguely funny stories. Shock, horror - we in Britain aren't fans any more! We're fully-rounded (but slightly skewed) individuals who like going to spend weekends in hotels to drink a lot. How many of us can share Ken Forman's delightful fantasies of bugging Andy Hooper in his garden (but maybe it would take an international incidence the size of Clinton's dick to redefine "backyard buggery" to the British sense of the term?) Too many late nights hanging out with Ted White, Victor Gonzalez and Frank Lunney have turned me into more of a displaced American fan than a true Brit. That's why I'm talking about fanzines here when no-one else at the Bristol SF group could give a toss. And because of this sense of shared wavelength, my choice for this year's Nova has to be Victor Gonzalez's *Squib* which has been frequent, contentious, readable, and mentions me a lot (oh, so that's what it is. I'm not in *Banana Wings* or *Plokta* enough!). It's just a pity it's not eligible. Oh well, maybe there's something from Ireland that no-one's sent me that I ought to be voting for?

After all the above, it will probably come as a relief to many to discover that this fabulously sexy 13th issue of *Balloons Over Bristol* is aimed entirely at people who like drinking, eating, going to parties, listening to music, and - erm - hearing about Doctor Who conventions. Take it away Nick...

Event One

Winter Gardens, Weston-super Mare, 23-24 August 1997

Doctor Who Convention Report
by Nick Walters

Tickets to the Big Bang

Event One is the hydrogen inrush which kick-started the Universe - the big bang. Fortunately, this Event One turned out to be something a lot safer (I think) - a Doctor Who convention. It took place last August, with a second one this June. This is a report of the 1997 Event One.

The Two Pauls

Two Pauls feature largely in my life. Paul Vearncombe is a friend I have known for years and years, we share the same tastes in music, comedy, films, etc., that I often think we should get married. Paul Hinder (who writes as Paul Leonard) was my co-author on "Dry Pilgrimage", a New Adventure we were working on for Virgin Publishing at the time of this convention. It was with Paul V that I attended Event One.

"Your Christian Hotel in Weston"

I am not a Christian. I am not even faintly religious. How was it then, that I booked myself and Paul into the only Methodist hotel in Weston? Well, after spending 45 minutes on the phone trying desperately to find somewhere for us on the Saturday before Bank Holiday, I was so relieved that the Highbury Hotel had a room that I completely failed to see the chilling words quoted at the top of this paragraph on their advert. Paul, being of a similar atheist bent, expressed similar misgivings, especially if the proprietors learned of the rather negative portrayal of religion in Doctor Who. And so we set off on that sunny Saturday morning in expectation of much fun and frolics and theological discussions over breakfast.

"The ORIGINAL Full Metal Jacket"

After dumping our stuff at the hotel, testing the beds (the consistency of marshmallow) and throwing the dead woodlice out of the window, we walked back down huge, horrendous Highbury Hill (I didn't describe walking up it because the memory is still too traumatic) and onto the sea front. Outside the Winter Gardens, we met Darren and Kevin, of the local group of which I am a proud and loyal member.

It was a breezy day, sunny and fresh, and it felt good to be at a brash and busy seaside resort. Paul and I had left our Davros T-shirts at home, and chosen something anonymous instead. We felt that to attend a DW convention wearing a DW T-shirt would be somehow inappropriate. Or would it? I am quite happy to wear my Davros T-shirt to the pub, gig or club. It and I have both been ridiculed many times. So, why didn't I wear it to the con? Embarrassment? Probably. Also, the mere act of being at the con, people would know I was a fan without having to proclaim the fact on a T-shirt.

We did see many, many DW T-shirts over the weekend - ranging from the cool (pic of a Dalek with the legend "The ORIGINAL Full Metal Jacket") to the sad (pic of a TARDIS bearing the legend "The TARDIS" Well I never). Kevin wore a "Gashead" T-Shirt. Can't remember them ever appearing in the programme.

Moment of Epiphany

Up to this point, I was, I suppose, in denial - being all negative and "isn't it sad, two grown men going to a Doctor Who convention" and preparing to be cynical about the whole thing.

I suppose it was just my defence mechanism - I'm used to downplaying my love of Who in "normal" society, so here I was doing it now. But, I didn't need to - I was no longer in "normal" society (thank God - erm, I mean, thank Rassilon) - I was amongst people with a common interest, and we could all be as "sad" as we liked and not give a toss what anyone thought.

The exact moment my attitude went through the alteration described above was when Colin Baker and Nicola Bryant rolled up in Bessie. Oh, how the sight melted my fanboy heart, and all my cynicism and negativity evaporated.

Colin looked a lot fatter, older and greyer than I had imagined him to be. Well, he must be getting on a bit. Funnily enough, he looked far more "Doctor-ish" than he ever did in the programme. Nicola Bryant was lovely as ever, a stonkingly attractive woman with really striking blue eyes. My teenage crush on her returned in full force, and I stood utterly unable to move. It was a strange and rather unwelcome feeling, but it passed and I was able to get my camera into action and take some pics. You could tell from Colin Baker's face that he absolutely hated wearing that multi-coloured coat. Colin and Nicola struck various poses for the fans, like standing up in Bessie and staring out to sea as if they expected Sea Devils to emerge. They needn't have worried, the Weston mud would have got them.

Degradation of the Daleks (well, one of them at least)

Inside, the Winter Gardens is a pretty spacious, though rather anonymous, convention type place. Straight in front of the entrance was the most important place - the bar. To the right, a corridor, off which led the three main areas of the event - the convention hall where the panels were to be held, the exhibition room (which would also be the site of the autograph sessions which I was not going to attend) and the merchandise room, where I was to spend absolutely ages, but not much cash.

First of all, we went to the exhibition room, which was way cool - the air conditioning was working overtime. Against the walls, as if awaiting a firing squad, stood sundry Doctor Who monsters and costumes. Some of them might even have been authentic. Here an Ogron in uncharacteristically camp pose, there a couple of Cybermen loitering as if on the look-out for spare tin-foil. Pride of place was given to a Dalek, which they were going to auction off on Sunday. What an ignoble end for this fearsome creature, scourge of the galaxy, its name a byword for terror on a thousand worlds. It gave vent to its frustration by screeching intermittently "You must obey the Daleks or you will be exterminated!!!"

The Doctor Cacks Himself

The best thing in the room was an exhibition of children's paintings along one wall. The teacher had probably said something like, "Now, Class 4G (or whatever), there's going to be a Doctor Who exhibition this weekend, and I'd like you to draw a monster that you would like to see Doctor Who fight." If any of the resultant monsters had ever appeared in the series, the Doctor would have filled his question-mark boxer shorts with Time Lord poo very, very quickly. Huge, skeletal, fire-breathing demons with headless dripping bodies clutched in their claws, tanks with giant alien skull heads, badly-drawn octopoid blobs with eyes at the ends of their tentacles - all these made the Krotons seem very dull indeed, and made you wonder about what these kiddies had for breakfast that day.

Scantly Clad Young Maidens With Tinsel Hair

Also in the exhibition hall, standing about, clearly wishing they were somewhere else, were a number of Scantly Clad Young Maidens With Tinsel Hair. They looked as incongruous as the TARDIS is always described to be in Terrance Dicks books. I did spend more time looking at these than the Doctor Who exhibits - but not too much, as they only looked about fourteen. What they were there for, I had no idea - but was soon to find out.

It's Only "Human Nature"

A quick look around the merchandise room left me reeling and dying to spend vast amounts of money. The presence of my credit cards in my wallet was a constant source of temptation. What really amazed me, though, was that one stall had a copy of the New Adventure "Down" which wasn't meant to come out until October. Also, a load of old New Adventures, through which I hunted eagerly for "Human Nature" - the only one I hadn't got. I'd bought it in May 1995 when it came out, and was so moved by it that I lent it to my girlfriend. Then in August we split up, never to see each other again. I was devastated - she still had my copy of "Human Nature." I still have her typewriter, though, which is some consolation. Anyway, to my joy, there in the box I found a copy of "Human Nature" and bought it for three quid. Reunited at last!

Speak Up, Brigadier!

At about 11-ish, David Howe officially opened the event by shouting something like "Hello Weston! Are you all having fun?" and then told us where the fire exits and bogs were.

Then, with a dazzling, breathtaking display of (a) laser and some smoke, Nicholas Courtney took to the stage and spoke about something or other - I don't know what, because he didn't have his microphone switched on. It was probably very interesting, though.

Why Peri Sucks

The day soon settled into a routine - convention panel, questions from the audience, then a half hour break, just enough time for a pint and some sarnies.

Nicola Bryant received a warm reception, as you would expect. She told the story of how she was rescued by a nude German swimmer whilst filming "Planet of Fire." I know this story is a hoary old convention chestnut by now, and I had read of it before, but it was very funny, especially as Nicola mimed the actions. Her story of her first day filming on Doctor Who gave quite an insight into how the programme was made. What was evident was how badly the character of Peri was treated. Apparently, John Nathan-Turner ordered that Nicola wore "clingy" costumes all the time, despite Nicola's protests which were totally ignored. This amazed me somewhat, that the "screaming scantily clad companion" was actively aimed for, and got. Nicola came across as intelligent, witty, amusing, a person you would like to get to know. What a pity that Peri was never allowed to display any of these attributes.

Non-Stop Erotic Cabaret

I have mentioned the laser display before each guest - well, for Colin, they really pulled out all the stops. The lights darkened. The smoke machine spurted its sinister gas over the front rows with a noise like a pit of vipers. The laser wrote the words "COLIN BAKER - DOCTOR WHO" on the rear wall (so you had to crane round to see it, if you could be

bothered). And then, Colin Baker's voice intoned some bollocks about Event One, time, space, and moving backwards through time (more like a hedge, judging by his appearance later) which ended with the words "I am... Doctor Who." As if by then I wasn't jack-knifed in my seat with mixed embarrassment and hilarity along with everyone else in the audience, something worse happened. We discovered the ultimate purpose of the scantily clad young maidens with tinsel hair. To a version of the theme tune which sounded as though it had been remixed by Orbital - no, it wasn't that good, on second thoughts - they pranced onto the stage and performed an erotic dance.

Yes, that's right - an erotic dance to the theme music of Doctor Who. I knew then that this was one of the moments of my life which would stay with me until my deathbed.

It was by far the most surreal sight of the weekend, and I just had to take some pictures in case no-one believed me. After I had recovered from my paroxysms of laughter and Colin took the stage, I had to wonder why they had put on such a pointless show which had more to do with end-of-season cabaret shows than Doctor Who. The laser show was cheesy enough, but this was beyond cheese and into an area of naffness for which there is no name. No-one I spoke to was impressed, most were non-plussed. Still, it gave us a laugh - that's the main thing. I only hope that the girls were paid well for their services.

"Are you going for a pee?"

Paul and I had visited the bar before Colin's panel, and by the end we were dying for a slash, so we got out of our seats and headed for the door. "Where are you going? Is this boring you?" snapped Colin Baker. "Or are you going for a pee?" The guy's psychic!

"Fast Arse"

After the heady day, Paul and I retired to a nearby pub to indulge ourselves in an extremely cheap meal of vegeburger and chips, so cheap, that the pint of Stella accompanying it was more expensive. Indeed, the lager was probably more nourishing. Paul, being quite a healthy chap, bemoaned consuming such "fast arse" (as he termed it) but he, being a total skinflint like me, could not resist the amazing cheapness of the "meal" And, once plastered with tomato sauce, mustard (French and English), tartare sauce and salad cream, the burger was indeed palatable.

"I drink a lager drink..." (well, it was in the charts at the time)

After returning to the hotel, and both having a bath (at different times, I hasten to add), and spraying the room with deodorant to rid it of the smell of bibles and spiders, deciding not to shave, donning our glad rags, and seeing if we could see naked women through the windows opposite (we couldn't), Paul and I decided to go out and get pissed. The ensuing evening was extremely alcoholic, and a large portion of it was spent in the company of an inebriated hen party from Nailsea. The lass getting wed was the same age as me, with the same colour hair, and was about as pissed as me. I quite liked her. I asked her if she wanted one night of passion before a lifetime of marital boredom... no I didn't. Paul did. No, that's not fair, he's not writing this. Neither of us did, but maybe later in the evening, some bloke did. I don't know. I don't know a lot of things, and after the amount of booze I sank that evening, I probably know even less things. After escaping from the hen party, we ended up in a Godawful pub/night-club called Stars which was shite. Really shite. But at least it was open after hours. I can't remember what happened later. It seems that we went out on the beach, getting our boots and jeans plastered with mud, and scaring seagulls - or so Paul tells me.

"I say, are you here for the cricket?"

At breakfast the next day, we were seated at the same table as three other fans from Cardiff. We spent a lively half-hour discussing favourite TV comedies, and it turned out that we were all fans of "King of the Hill". During this chat, an elderly gentleman who resembled the Major from "Fawlty Towers" strode up to our table and said, "I say, are you here for the cricket?"

We assured him that we weren't, and he glared at us, probably wondering what we were down here for. Little did he know, ha ha!

Outside, rain started to fall. Summer was drawing to its close.

"Hello, my name's Nick as well."

On the way to the Winter Gardens, we spotted Nick Courtney outside his hotel (the Old Colonial, appropriately enough) and observed him climb into Bessie and head at breakwind speed towards the Winter Gardens. There, he posed for photos and Paul persuaded me to have my photo taken next to him (Nick, that is, not Paul) and so I did. In my leather jacket in which I (hope I) looked (though did not feel) cool.

We were in time for Carole Ann Ford's panel - what a vivacious woman, quite mad, in a nice way. It was so hot in the convention room, and I was so hungover, that it was a struggle to stay conscious - no, alive. Fortunately, by the time of Lis Sladen's panel, things had cooled down a bit.

The Banana Incident

Lis Sladen was the only celebrity whose autograph I managed to acquire, and what did I do? Ask her to sign a banana. I wasn't going to do it, but Paul, Darren and Kevin egged me on. I shouldn't have listened to the bastards! Because all Lis did was say sternly "I'm not going to sign THAT!" as if it was a dog turd not a banana, and signed my convention ticket instead. Huh! Some people have no sense of humour.

I ate the banana instead.

Paul had to listen to be moaning about how I'd annoyed one of my childhood heroines, the poor sod. I bought "Vengeance on Varos" to placate him.

From Fandom to Fame

Completely conned-out, Paul Vearncombe and I walked to the station and got on the train and went back to Bristol. A few days later, after months of prevarication from Virgin, Paul Leonard and I at last received the go-ahead for "Dry Pilgrimage." So it was that I attended the second Event One in June 1998 as a producer, as well as a consumer, of Who culture. It was a great convention as well - more Nicola, Anthony Ainley, B.O. ridden Doctor Who fans, some sad wanker dressed as the Master, spending 70 quid on Doctor Who videos, transvestites on the streets of Weston, going out on the pull again and failing again, and the scantily clad dancing girls with tinsel hair again. And shortly afterwards I got the go-ahead for "Dominion", my BBC Doctor Who book, on which I am now working. So my advice to any budding Doctor Who authors out there is: go to a convention, it boosts your Doctor Who karma.

We now come to the Amsterdam section of the fanzine - not a special homage to the latest Booker prize winner Ian McEwan (whose book, disappointingly, isn't all about Amsterdam) - but three pieces inspired by the recent group expedition to the Netherlands to celebrate Pete Binfield's 30th birthday. Doug was so keen to get to the party that he arrived 10 days early - which meant of course he had ample time to collect material for a fanzine article.

FAST SEX, SLOW FOOD

by Ranger Doug

It didn't take long for the nature of the Dutch Dichotomy to manifest itself. Soon after arriving at Schipol, thanks to the miracle of a fully-integrated transport system, I was sitting in a pleasant brown-bar in affluent downtown Den Haag. My host, Pete Binfield, pointed out the by now obvious failing of the Netherlands as a nation - "There's just no such thing as a quick beer in this country."

During the next fortnight not once was that simple statement challenged by the standards of Dutch customer service. From the closed beauty of Delft to the narrow college streets of Leiden ordering beer became a combination of Waiting For Godot and the National Lottery. Such is the way of the continent - not for them the frantic barside scrum, but the more relaxed table-service tab culture.

As for ordering food...just don't even go there.

Before I go any further though I feel I must clarify matters. The lack of speed and attentiveness in dealing with Joe Public's wishes does not reflect badly on the Dutch character. Indeed some of the waiters and barstaff were more than friendly, (to the point of giving Pete colouring pencils and a picture to fill in on one occasion). It's just being British we can't bring ourselves to embrace these European ideas so different to our own way of life. When you stick in the insidious colonising effects of American imperialistic fast food culture, we as a country are becoming a nation of uptight whingers. We want our food/beer now or we'll damn well complain. Maybe we should adopt the more continental way of life... after all they do have a lower heart attack rate over there. But anyway, I'm digressing.

Let's not be subtle about it - most visitors don't go to Holland to discuss health issues or customer service. It's also not for the cheese, windmills, canals, Van Gogh or the many Argentinian restaurants ("grilled meat our speciality"). The liberal attitude to sex and drugs is hardly a carefully guarded secret.

Drugs...well it is as easy as walking into a coffee-house and asking for a joint. No shocks there, but sex...

Well to be truthful, I don't know if it was my naive nature or the whole Scottish Calvinistic trip, but when friends had come back from Amsterdam with tales of the Red Light District somehow I didn't really believe them. But it was all true, sort of. All those women sitting in their wee booths were there to have sex with you for fifty guilders, but they all looked so sad and bored. It looked so unappealing, so clinical, and unattractive. Later when someone

in our group admitted to 'having made full use of the facilities', his account confirmed everything I suspected.

In the end I did feel I had to see more of the Red Light District. Missing out the sex shows and museums I opted to check out a peepshow. Sure enough right there in front of your face a couple were having sex...but it was so mechanical and unerotic. I could see they were talking during the show but all I could imagine they were discussing was last night's episode of Coronation Street.

In Holland most town centres have a Febo. Febo is a fast food automat franchise serving what looks like rather inedible croquettes. You see people sticking coins in a slot, opening the wee glass doors and getting something that could resemble food. On a good day. Pete described Febo to me as 'a road accident waiting to happen.' Guide books say no way, but somehow there are always queues outside them.

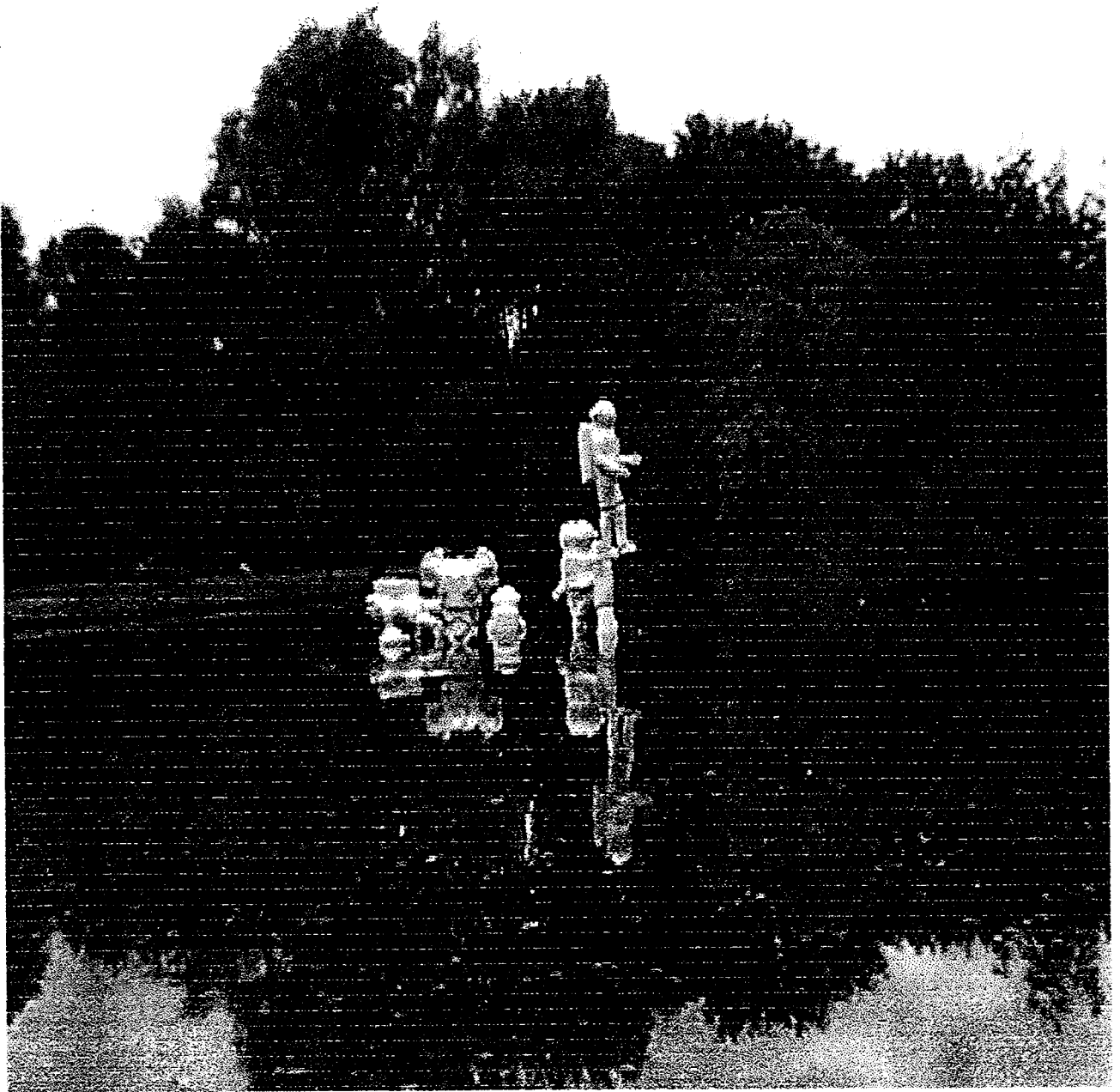
When I saw the prostitutes sitting there in the Red Light District it reminded me so much of Febo. You take your money out, the glass door opens and you get your instant relief. It's sex, but not erotic; it's sex but not emotional; and it's sex with a stranger who does it god knows how many times a day/week/year. What we're talking about here is fast food intercourse - FeboSex.

Which leads me back to my theory of The Dutch Dichotomy.

In the Netherlands you can get anything you want instantly to satisfy your cravings...it may not be good, it may not be worth it, and you probably won't feel fulfilled by it. If you were in Britain you'd probably call Watchdog about it. However if you want the real thing, something good, tasty and enriching your going to have to wait, and wait, and wait. By the time you get what you ordered you may be hallucinating with starvation (or mushrooms), but you know that once you finished gorging yourself your not going to feel ashamed and dirty. My advice just relax and enjoy the wait.

Doug's Top tips for surviving Holland

- 1) Don't go to Delft on Mondays - it's shut
- 2) Big beer = big mortgage drain
- 3) You know how you need loose change in Britain for the buses? That's what the toilets are like here.
- 4) Beware of genital warts! (oh yeah and pickpockets - could be linked; we should be told)
- 5) Try the slagroom tart - it's not what you think it is!



Spacemen, Vondelpark, Amsterdam

THE MYTH OF AMSTERDAM

by Christina Lake

I didn't really like Amsterdam that much the first couple of times I went there. My visits were just day trips from Den Haag, and my main reaction to the place was that it was big and noisy. Even its canals seemed to lack the charm of the smaller Dutch cities. They were too busy to be cute, and way too full of sight-seeing boats, reminding me somewhat of a waterised version of London Transport. But I *was* impressed by the red-light district. Women really did stand in windows wearing strange underwear. Even after living in Bordeaux, where the hookers operated openly on the street corners, I hadn't seen anything like that. But, at the time, the Red Light District was just a curiosity. It didn't impact on my view of Amsterdam as a whole, which was as just another big city. A Manchester of the Netherlands, I suppose, in the days before Manchester was trendy.

Sometimes I think what makes a great city is only fashion. There was a lot of examples of that when I was travelling. Sydney, for one, was generally acknowledged by any warm-blooded Brit to be fantastic. But because I was staying with locals, all I heard were the complaints about traffic and poor planning policies. Melbourne, which I thought was more cosmopolitan - and boy, were there a lot of restaurants! - never had this cachet with the back-packer set. New Zealand isn't exactly renowned for its night life either, but its cities exuded a kind of amateur alternativeness that made me want to move there and put on fringe theatre productions. Bangkok was another must-do destination, but all most tourists see are a few blocks in the centre where they can hang out with fellow backpackers, buy souvenirs, go to sex shows and watch videos of recent movies (so much de rigueur on the Khao San road that people chose their restaurants more on the basis of the film menu than the food.)

Then there's Bristol. Generally acknowledged as a cool city, even though it is so lacking in decent medium to large music venues that famous Bristol band Massive Attack* won't even play there, and cultural highlights in the performing arts tend to be the latest ex-West End Lloyd Webber (the council were so taken with these shows that last year instead of Christmas lights they put up advertisements for Miss Saigon and Phantom of the Opera.) But all of this is irrelevant when it comes to nightlife. Despite being surrounded by an ever increasing number of out of town multiplex cinemas and malls, the city centre remains the place to be. Even in mid-week the streets are crowded, though you could be forgiven for mistaking a lot of the action for a youth club outing. Bristol may have this reputation of being full of weird clubs playing ethnic trance music, but when you scratch beneath the surface hype, what you find is pubs full of students getting plastered or school kids and young office workers out for a night of drinking, followed by a disco down at Odyssey. Even the once-alternative Kandi Klub has taken to playing Verve records and other bland-pop classics rather than hi-energy Indie. The true cool quotient of Bristol probably centres round a few hundred people in Montpelier, St Werburgh's and St Pauls, while the rest of the city doesn't give a damn.

But back to Amsterdam. The next time I went there was in 1995 after Intersection. I was slightly bemused by my American companions' evident love for the city. Dan and Lynn Steffan were, I think, on their third visit. Lynn even chose to have a tattoo of the Dutch flag done while she was there. Yet, all we seemed to do was hang out in bars, drink Heineken and smoke dope. When were we going to start sightseeing, visit art galleries, go round the Anne Frank house? Eventually it dawned on me that these attractions were not what we were there for. The point of Amsterdam was that it's a great city for doing precisely what we were doing. In fact, where else could you smoke dope openly, outside in a public square? Where else could you just go into a bar and casually ask for the drugs menu? My preconceptions of what you look for in a place, and even what people chose to do there on their holidays were undergoing a sudden challenge.

My aesthetics were still very suburban English, I guess, despite a six week trip around the US and that year in Bordeaux. I liked seas and mountains, open moorland and other overtly scenic landscapes. When it came to towns and cities, they had to be picturesque and old, or full of fabulous monuments. Paris counted in the latter category, though I realised there was more to Paris than that. America, all unexpectedly, triggered

* Since writing the above, Massive Attack have agreed to play 4 nights at Bristol University, which just underlines the point that there simply isn't anywhere large enough for big bands to play Bristol in one venue in one night.

my sense of wonder, and I had to invent an entirely new category to take in its big shiny skyscrapers and totally non-European layouts. But overall I was capable of preferring sleepy Bonn with its orderly streets and Rhineland scenery to chaotic Amsterdam. And I still thought that a holiday, even a long weekend, should be filled with one or two experiences of an overtly cultural nature to justify the sybaritic evenings of drinking and eating.

If anything, world travel merely increased my work ethic approach to city visiting. Guide books have a lot to answer for (in South East Asia, because everyone, but everyone had the same Lonely Planet guide, the advice one traveller gave me was to only go to places NOT listed in the guide book.) But if you're travelling on your own, it's good to have a purpose. In Australia, each city has its own art gallery and own botanic garden, and I didn't feel happy till I'd seen both. (Australian scenery and vegetation being what they are, it's difficult to get bored either by their art - which represents it in many fashions - or by their nature which demonstrates it in vivo.) It probably wasn't till Singapore and most particularly Malacca, that I began to tire of this approach. I wore myself out traipsing round a humid Singapore, looking for bird markets and Chinese temples, when really the only bit of my stay I enjoyed was sitting in the Raffles Hotel, drinking a Singapore Sling and throwing nutshells on the floor. (Though the most bizarre bit was being chatted up by an American sailor.) Then in Malacca, I witnessed a set of tourist amenities under construction around me. Malacca had decided to market its colonial past, so by the time I arrived, they were in the process of building luxury holiday apartments to go with the new replica Portuguese galleon, the reconstructed Sultan's palace and the hygienically paved squares, complete with souvenir concession stands outside the tarted-up colonial Dutch town hall. Despite my love of history, it didn't take me long to work out that I preferred the Chinese Malaysian part of town on the other side of the river with its traffic-filled streets and less sanitised mix of antique shops, temples, mosques and workshops.

By the time I left Malaysia, my interest in sightseeing had waned to an enthusiasm for eating in street cafés, a desire to find and talk to any fellow travellers, and an urgent need for someone literate to swap books with.

In Jakarta, before I learnt this lesson, I battled my way out to Old Batavia, to see the colonial Dutch part of the city. It was like Amsterdam transplanted to a hot humid climate. Canals and Dutch style bridges and buildings reminded me of Europe. But when I got closer, I saw the pollution, and was hit by the rotting sulphurous smell of the water. The canal soon plunged under a road; the Dutch buildings were replaced by a shanty town of huts, and I was left picking my way along a dirty, noisy street with no pavement. By comparison, any experiences of the real Amsterdam were an idyll.

Perhaps the Indonesians were deliberately letting their Dutch heritage fall into decay. The Dutch today have a reputation for being liberal and progressive, but as a colonial power they were as bad as any other. The Indonesians, looking to the relative prosperity of Malaysia with a certain amount of envy, claimed that the British did more for their colonies than the Dutch. The Dutch certainly did not want to let go, and there were long years of war and negotiation before they accepted the independence of their East Indian colony. I met several Dutch tourists while I was over there, and liked them all. Drinking Jamesons with Svett and Lunke on the veranda of a hotel in Bogor, as the sound of thunder echoed around us, while across the courtyard two Indonesians were typing away on a manual typewriter, was my first real moment of magic in South East Asia. Most of the Dutch I met weren't backpacking round the world, they were just intelligent, slightly adventurous people on holiday for a few weeks. I think they felt a particular connection to the country because of its colonial past, but were slightly uneasy about how the Indonesians felt about them. Did they hate them, like the Dutch themselves hate the Germans? Or did they, in some peculiar way, understand each other? Talking to the Indonesians, it was clear

that both were true: they resented their former colonial masters and were used to having them around.

Back in Amsterdam this September for Pete Binfield's 30th birthday party, I had largely forgotten - on a conscious level, at least - South East Asia and the rest of my travels. I didn't even remember that it was my first trip to Europe in three years. My first piece of sensawunda reminder was the trains. America doesn't do trains, so the most state-of-the-art technology I met in my year away was the subway in Singapore. In the Netherlands, you get these amazing double-decker yellow trains, that kind of glide along the tracks, and occasionally pull in at futuristic-looking stations. I wanted one to take home with me. But trains and trams have always been part of my love of continental Europe. Where the switch had come was that suddenly I could see why everyone raved about Amsterdam. Three years before I'd visited Frank, Dan and Lynn's version of Amsterdam and enjoyed it as much for the sense of dislocation as for the city itself. This time I was there under my own steam, no longer scared of the drug menus, or unsure whether I was getting high, or merely blipping out through tiredness. But it wasn't just the drugs, it was the overall sense of alternative culture. A feeling that I was in a city that stood for something unconventional, from sex to tattoos, from art to street decor, the clothes people wore, the street performers, the theme bars. It was a city where you could feel comfortable being different. And the tourists, instead of being an intrusion, were part of the show. If people weren't there partying, it wouldn't be the same city, and it sure as hell wasn't the Dutch who were filling the bars in the Leidseplein, or thronging the streets at night in the red light district.

But does Amsterdam really stand for all the things I imagine? Pete arranged a candlelit boat trip for one night of his party. Competing against the ratio of approximately 1.5 bottles of wine per person, the hapless tour guide had a bit of trouble making herself heard. But what filtered through from her commentary was the extraordinary number of 17th century churches clustered in among the bars, canals and sex shows of Amsterdam. No longer used, she claimed, as the Dutch have stopped being religious. How did this come about? I thought. This evolution from Protestant stronghold to champion of free sex and decriminalised drugs? And how happy are the Dutch people really with their city's current identity? Does it necessarily symbolise their values, or has it been hijacked by a set of transnational partygoers, leased out to the world with the same ease as the Dutch adopt the English language, and maybe for the same purpose: to hold strangers at arm's length by presenting a public face that no-one can get past?

Out in the nighttime canals with us were canoeists. If proof were needed that this was a mad, yet extraordinary city it was these fleets of canoeists, paddling round the canals, out on the same water as big boats containing drunken tourists. They weren't there for exercise, or any of the clean living reasons you might find in New Zealand, they just seemed to be a weird tribe of people who got their kicks out of hanging out in canoes. Maybe they were selling sex, like everyone else in the city; though sex for athletic people who don't mind getting wet. I wanted to give them one of our surplus bottles of wine, but I wasn't next to the window, and besides Pete's sister Emma was already stashing them away, in the misguided belief that we would need them for a room party later. But Amsterdam, being the kind of late-night city that it is, swallowed us up into bars, clubs and sex shows so that when people finally crawled back to their rooms, it was through exhaustion, to sleep like the dead, and to remember days later, as if through a haze, what an extraordinary place it was: Amsterdam.

A SAVAGE JOURNEY TO THE HEART OF AMSTERDAM.
as narrated by Pete and Sue Binfield

OK, we don't have no steenking time for subtlety so lets just chronicle last night shall we? (Although frankly, I don't see how mere words can do it justice).

"There are many good ways to get drunk. Drinking is one of them"

Firstly, the boat trip. After a harrowing experience extracting 40 guilders from everyone (only to return the change in the form of a tip later in the night) we boarded en-masse. Paul was in Amsterdam and so he had inevitably broken himself (again) – he had to go home early and sit on the loo all night. Craig, Dave and Matt were busy chatting up "Irish Birds" and were nowhere to be seen. Then, just as the boat was pulling off Craig sprinted down the road and collapsed in a wheezing heap into a pile of wine bottles. Much wine was drunk. Too much. ALL the sights were ignored and Simon (birthday boy) failed to take his clothes off. The "What Time Will Sue Hurl" sweepstake was set up but in spite of Richard's best efforts at pouring pink wine down Sue's throat, nobody won.

"If I was going to be in a live sex show I think I'd have to be a dominatrix"

Then it was off to the red light area and the Excalibur bar (complete with bazooka) which played Mark Slater's all time favourite track (on several different occasions). Elaine then kindly organised some live sex for us (personally I prefer my sex dead, but then I am 30). This was, allegedly, Team Building (and Bonding). We went to the Casa Rosa place next door only to find out that it was just a front for the place at the other end of town. It took about 5 minutes of increasingly less patient explanation for the bouncer to convince Mark of this fact ("Excuse me, which one of you actually speaks English?").

"That's the first time I've had a blowjob with a condom on"

In the sex show Pete cowered in a corner (having been there before and knowing what could happen) while his sister (who was now EXTREMELY drunk (and loud)) screamed "SEX. We want SEX" at anyone who moved. Unfortunately Mark moved through her field of vision and got shouted out of the way. Pete Crump can now tell you stories about bananas that will make your blood boil, James discovered the power of vaginal muscles and Craig. Well, Craig, the airline pilot (from a certain well known airline) who is getting married in 2 months. Well... Craig got collared and led round the stage with a bone in his mouth and a sad attempt to wag his tail. Then he got blindfolded and whipped a little. Then he was attached to a post and whipped again, really quite mercilessly. And then he was forced to wear a head mounted dildo and attempt to insert it into an unwilling dominatrix. Personally I almost lost my bowel control with the laughing.

"I'm glad I went to the sex show, it gave me a chance to get my head down"

Then it was back to the Excalibur bar for some more Beer and the dawning of Pete's birthday. Emma just got louder while everyone else hid in the background. Craig assures us that this is exactly what all the stewardesses are like 'down route' except there are 14 of them and only a handful of male crew. Poor thing. He has our sympathy and also our envy.

When we got chucked out of Excaliburs there were still around 15 people left. Chris Cowan very bravely (and with great British foresight) beat off a pickpocket using only his trusty broly and we all staggered back toward the Leidseplein.

"I can't drink, I'm saving up to have my dick licked"

Upon arrival at The Plein (as we now know it) it was around 03.30 and everything was shut or shutting. The party had dwindled to around 10 when Mark Slater (he does figure a lot this evening doesn't he?) started becoming the aggressive pleasure seeker we all know and love. After trying about 4 bars and almost getting attacked by the bouncers in two of them we were on the verge of giving up when he spotted the Hard Rock Café – nirvana. An Oasis of beer. We rushed in and just as Mark dove for the bar, they shut. Fuck. However, to be fair they did point out a bar across the road that was open till 5 (The Gallery), so we went there. By now there were only 6 of us, we had lost Craig and Lee but retained Emma ("for gods sake Emma, when are you going to drop unconscious?"), assorted Petes and of course Mark. They were playing Techno dancy stuff but what the hell, the aging rockers took to the dance floor and made it our own. Mark headbanged his way through entire albums of Euro Pop before they took the hint and put on Guns and Roses, followed by The Doors and then more EuroPop. I believe that at one stage the entire bar was watching Mark with a mixture of admiration and disbelief. Rock God. We Are NOT Worthy. Mark for Pres.

Then, all to soon it was 4.45 and we had to go. It turns out there had been a major stabbing right outside about 20 minutes earlier, but despite rumours to the contrary Mark was not involved (this time).

"Last night has not only caught up with me, it lapped me twice"

Tattoo postscript

While sitting around in Café the Neighbours, Sue spontaneously organised her first event. A trip to the local tattoo parlour to see her get the needle. Suprisingly only 6 people took her up on the offer – everyone else was waiting for Amsterdam to open (well, it WAS a Monday and Doug DID warn you) to go shopping and do culture. So, the tattoo expedition ended up in the red light district wherein Sue conveniently forgot last night's promise to have a life-sized Kimono Dragon tattooed onto her and instead chose a spirally thingy for her belly button. James got attacked (well, blood was drawn at any rate) by the neighbourhood junkie and in the spirit of background research, for which this weekend has become famous, Pete looked into some tattoo prices: apparently it costs 100 guilders per letter to get your willy done! It was around this time that Pete and James resolved to open "Pete'n'James' Utilitarian Tattoo Shop" which would only tattoo things like "This Way Up" (on the top of the head); "Once Lit, Retire to Safe Distance" (on the buttocks); "Fragile" and "Do Not Dry Clean" on people. Pete also floated his plan to get a 10 inch ruler (suitably scaled) tattooed onto his willy - just so he could use the photograph to wow the babes at parties!

((extracted from the party newsletter, written in situ. All quotes in italics can be verified, and the guilty named - should anyone bribe me enough!))

Pumpkin (over Bristol) Pie

by Tina Horswill

First trap your pumpkin. It is a closely guarded secret that pumpkins are biodegradable, interstellar spaceships. These are deliberately lured into landing in pumpkin patches all over the USA by planting specially bred vines with enormous bright flowers which act as landing lights. The pumpkins are then trapped by the plants' tendrils. How else do you account for the overnight appearance of this enormous vegetable?

All of this is kept from the public to protect the vested interests of the canning industry; the Americans do a wonderful labour saving tinned pulped pumpkin thing, and there must be a huge CIA conspiracy to cover up the origins of this.

If you can find a tin then it probably contains enough to do this recipe at least once; possibly twice.

Per cup steamed and pureed pumpkin (worked through some sort of sieve to get rid of the stringy bits):

1/2-1 tspn Cinnamon
1/2-1 tspn Ginger
Pinch - 1/4 tspn Nutmeg
Pinch - 1/4 tspn Clove
Pinch - 1/4 tspn Allspice
Aaghh, I nearly forgot the lemon;
zest from 1/2 lemon and juice from 1/4 lemon
1/2 cup caster sugar
1/4 pint cream
3 eggs (reserve 1 yolk for pastry)

Pastry (Approx 8 oz rich shortcrust)
8 oz (rounded tblspns) plain flour
2 oz butter
2 oz lard or hard vegetable fat
1 -2 oz caster sugar
1 egg yolk
approx 8 tblspns **cold** water

This lot will give you enough for 2 7 inch pie tins.

How difficult do you want to make this?

The really tricky way to obtain pumpkin is to cut a small hole in the top and, having got all the seeds and stringy bits out of the way, try to scrape out the useful bit; alternatively, you could cut into convenient sized pieces and then cut the skin off. However this does not leave you with a shell for making halloween lanterns with, which is probably the whole point of pumpkin pie.

Steam pumpkin until tender (depending on the size of chunks this could take about 25 mins).

Puree. A mouli is the easiest way to do this but you could force it through a sieve.

When it has cooled beat in 2 egg yolks, the sugar and spices and the lemon zest and juice. Before starting on the rest of the filling make sure you have pie tins ready, lined with pastry and resting. What do you mean, "how do you make the pastry"?

Rub the fat into the flour (using a mixer is easiest), add the sugar and when it is looking like pale breadcrumbs drop in the egg yolk. Add the water a little at a time to make a dough but don't let it get sticky. As soon as it looks as if it might stick together tip it onto a well floured board and shape into a ball. If possible let it rest, in the fridge, for 30 mins before doing anything else with it (who'd be pastry).

If it is too sticky roll it well in the flour; if it is too dry try kneading it very lightly with wet hands until it will form a ball.

Line the pie tins with pastry. Crimp the edges between index and middle finger knuckles before trimming. Stab well all over the base with a fork. Switch on the oven to about Gas 7, 200 C, 400 F.

Now, you can go back to the filling. Take the egg whites left over from recipe so far and whip to meringue (ok so how do you spell it?) consistency. Beat the double cream until really thick but not to butter, careful, this is a very fine distinction as one becomes the other very fast.

Fold in to the pumpkin mixture first the cream and then the egg whites. Pour into the pastry cases and bake. It will take about 30-40 mins; to test it's done stick a skewer or knife in the middle which should come away clean. If the pies seem to be browning fast but the middles aren't cooked turn down oven to cook filling more slowly without burning the rest.

Serve plain or for a pretty effect either dredged with icing sugar or squirted with aerosol cream. If either of the last two you could stencil on or do free-hand halloween lantern faces on!

But enough of pumpkins. Isn't it time we mentioned Dr. Who again? Oh no, it's:

NICK WALTERS' BIGGER ON THE INSIDE RECORD REVIEWS

Two hit albums this month pay homage to the TARDIS, the Doctor's clapped-out old time machine. What could it all mean? Are our pop stars confessing their Doctor Who fandom? Here's hoping, and maybe the new Spice Girls album will feature a ballad dedicated to the glory of the Doctor.

THE BEAUTIFUL SOUTH "Quench"

Paul: "This heart was like a TARDIS / I went and lost the key in a fight / I've never found a locksmith / Will you be my locksmith tonight?" Jacqueline: "Will I shite."

I have always had a soft spot for this band. I like their resolute oddness, their wordy wittiness, their refusal to change or update their image in the face of massive success. But their last album "Blue Is The Colour" was painfully dire, so I was a bit wary of "Quench." Happily, it's much better - Paul Heaton mentioning the TARDIS in the first song "How Long's A Tear Take To Dry" endearing it to me at once. The lyrics are as sharp and surreal as ever, and musically, it's funkier than normal thanks to the involvement of Fatboy Slim Norman Cook. There are no howlers like the excruciating cover of "Artificial Flowers" on their last album, but no classics like "I'll Sail This Ship Alone" either. On the whole, business as usual for the South.

MANIC STREET PREACHERS "This Is My Truth Tell Me Yours"

"I wish I had been born a girl and not this mess of a man."

This is the long-awaited follow-up to "Everything Must Go", and, sad to say, it wasn't worth the wait. The single, "If You Tolerate This Your Children Will Be Next", is the best thing here, there's nothing else as musically or lyrically interesting on the whole album. In place of passion and fire we get mournful dirges like "Born A Girl" [see above lyric] and "My Little Empire," where singer James Dean Bradfield is "bored of being bored, happy being sad." Not his fault; guitarist Nicky Wire wrote the lyrics, presumably on the bus, so lacking are they in wit or insight. In its favour, this album is well-produced, but I fear the sheen is there only to hide its chronic lack of depth. The final song, about the Hillsborough disaster, is unforgivable. "It's not the sort of thing people really want to hear us sing," whines Bradfield. Erm, it's EXACTLY the sort of thing we want to hear the Manics sing about! This is a sound of a band who have lost their way.

MANSUN "Six"

ALBUM OF THE YEAR!!!

"The nature of uncarved blocks is how to describe what's hard to describe."

This is the other album that references the TARDIS - it's featured on the cover, and in the fade-out, you can hear the familiar [well, to me anyway] dematerialisation noise. Tom Baker also narrates one track, and he's on the [quite preposterous] cover painting as well, in costume as the Doctor.

Multiple Doctor Who reference aside, this is, without doubt, my album of the year. Mansun have always been an unclassifiable, deliberately and annoyingly weird band. They are at once enormously popular - thanks to their boyish good looks and rather mid-80's style vocalising - and breathtakingly experimental. Their first album, "Attack of the Grey Lantern" was astonishingly assured and way past anything most guitar bands aspire to. But this... my God, what can I say? "The nature of uncarved blocks" indeed. This is breathtaking, beautiful, mad. It's like listening to the private soundtrack of a delusional genius, with guitars from heaven. I can't describe what it's like, because on paper the ingredients of "Six" seem awful: songs over nine minute long, middle eights with middle eights, guitar solos, grandiose song structures, portentous lyrics... all the ingredients of terrible music. But what Mansun have done is take all these ingredients, add to it their own pop sensibility, consummate musicianship and gloriously mad vision and make an album which blows the competition out of the water. Next to it, I'm sorry to say, the Manics album sounds laughably leaden and dull. Radiohead's "OK Computer" was voted the best album of all time by some sad music mag recently but it's lame and lettuce-limp compared to this. Mansun are a shot in the arm to British music and I love them and this insane, glorious record to bits.

MARK E. SMITH "The Post Nearly Man"

"The most merciful thing in the world is Man's inability to correlate all of his mind's contents, but the sciences one day - some say it is already upon us - will eventually open up such terrifying vistas of reality that we will either go mad from the revelation or flee into the blissful sleep, peace and safety of another New Dark Age. I'm Mark Edward Smith, these words are H.P. Lovecraft's, we give you The Horror In Clay."

Be afraid, be very afraid. Or confused. Who the hell is Mark E. Smith, I hear you cry. Well, Mark E. Smith is the front man of The Fall - whom, some of you may know, are my favourite band of all time. But this is a solo album from M.E.S., and even I quailed at the prospect. A spoken-word album? From M.E.S., whom to unbelievers sounds like a drunken tannoy announcer? Who would buy it? Well, Fall fans like me, of course, but I cannot see the appeal of this record outside the Fall fanbase. The first track, "The Horror in Clay", is a

fairly funny interpretation of a H.P. Lovecraft story, recorded presumably at an airfield, as it is marred by the sound of a light aircraft coming in halfway through and obscuring the words. The next track is 8 seconds of whistling. And further in, there is a track which is 8 seconds of... utter silence. All this ham-fisted pointlessness is hilarious to Fall fans like me. There is also the multi-part "Visitation of an American Poet" which features Smith's wife Julia Nagle and sinister, discordant background music. There is one recognisable tune, "The Caterer", in which other Fall musicians take part, but mostly this is just unintelligible ranting and elliptical, mad storytelling, and though I find it enjoyable in a novelty kinda way, I am probably one of only 3 people in the country who do.

BABYBIRD "There's Something Going On"

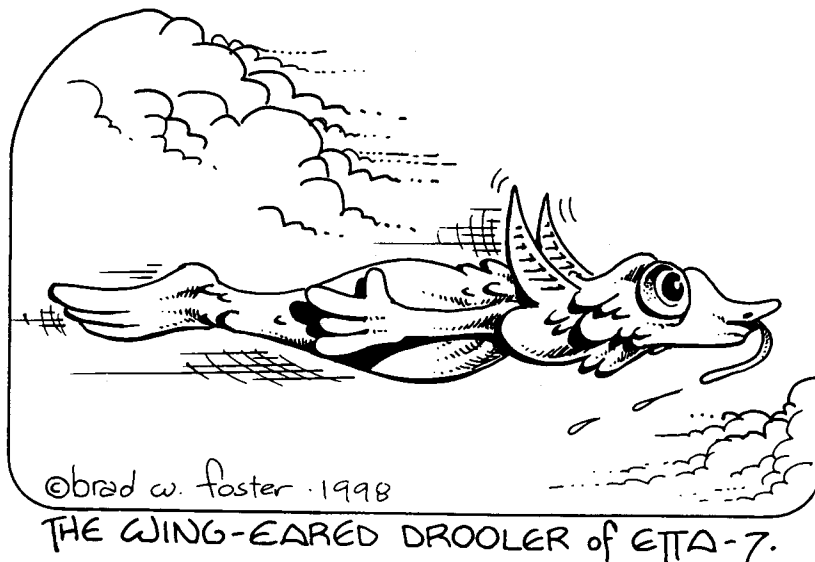
"He threw his stepson in the duck pond / Let the wife-beater out to make a pop song."

Welcome to the sinister and surreal world of Stephen Jones, a.k.a. Baby Bird. You may remember the hit single "You're Gorgeous" from a few years back. There's only one song like that here, the throwaway recent single "If You'll Be Mine". Next single "Back Together" showcases Jones' voice, which is impressive, almost operatic, hitting the top notes with awesome ease. It's a simple, startling song. The rest is very intense, dark and weird. Song structures are twisted and bent out of shape, sometimes exploding into discordant guitar, but more often lurking and prowling, with dubby bass and tinkling bar-room piano. Uncompromising and unclassifiable, this is the work of one of our more talented songwriters.

R.E.M. "Up"

"You want to climb the ladder / You want to see forever / You want to go out Friday / And you want to go forever / You want to cross your DNA / To cross your DNA with something reptile."

After 15 years and 11 albums, R.E.M. remain fresh by continually updating and reinventing themselves, and "Up" represents a vast sea-change in the R.E.M. sound, so much so that Michael Stipe's wonderful voice is often the only point of reference. The first track, "Airportman", is a woozy slice of ambient fuzz which owes much to Brian Eno. The whole album is curiously muted and experimental, and guitars are largely absent, with buzzing electronics and melodic bass guitar taking the lead. This is a major departure for R.E.M., and takes a bit of getting used to, but can be explained by the absence of the band's drummer Bill Berry, who quit last year, forcing R.E.M. into this strange and interesting new shape. The standout track is "Hope", a simple, addictive tune over which Michael Stipe sings lines such as those quoted above. It's strangely spiritual and uplifting. "Up" won't be seen as R.E.M.'s best album, but it's certainly their most beguiling.



PUNCTURE WOUNDS

A letter column, manipulated by Christina Lake

Joseph Nicholas, 15 Jansons Road, South Tottenham, London N15 4JU

Many thanks for *Balloons Over Bristol* 12; but *no thanks whatever* for utterly failing to even mention Judith's *Year of The Tiger* one-shot in your round-up of fanzines published for Corflu. And what's this about suspecting you should hate Hazel Ashworth for "intruding on some territory I've staked out for myself"? Look here, CJL, just because you've won a FAAN doesn't mean that you can go around appropriating certain bits of the globe for your exclusive literary use, you know. Or is the suppression-by-omission of *Year Of The Tiger* attributable to precisely this?

Who knows, had I actually received a copy at Corflu I might have been tempted. But, no, of course, I'm happy to share Australia with Judith (and other natives), but I did hope to get out my impressions before the 1999 Worldcon makes accounts of Australia as commonplace as flies round an Aussie barbie. Joseph continues:

Speaking of Hazel Ashworth's Corflu fanzine, however, I have to disagree with you that she wrote about Australia "well", with "anecdotal detail and sharp insight". Some anecdotes, yes, but the whole thing seemed a bit rushed and insubstantial. And I utterly disagree with her about the comfortably suburban nature of flights between Perth and the Eastern States: they're about as protracted as any other long-distance flight, with the distinction that once you get to the end you're still in the same country. For a truly suburban flight experience, you need to take a turboprop from Canberra to Melbourne, where you can joke with the steward about rushing furiously up and down the aisle to ensure the twenty passengers are served their tea and coffee before the captain comes on the intercom to announce that the landing is imminent. And that's one of the longer suburban-style internal flights!

As to the rest of the fanzine - readable, but not mind-grabbing enough to provoke comments. (Or "ray binks", as they say in apas. Don't they?) But Tim Goodrick seems to have been rather too overwhelmed by James Cameron's *Titanic*: the first half of the film was soppy and implausible nonsense (albeit that anyone who sets out to make a film about the sinking has to find something with which to fill up the film until the ship hits the iceberg), and although the sinking is depicted with jaw-dropping realism -- and for maximum impact is best seen from the front row of a cinema with the biggest screen possible -- I don't think it's quite enough to redeem the whole (and it doesn't remotely capture the panicky authenticity of Roy Baker's *A Night to Remember*, even if this latter film does whitewash Second Officer Lightoller's role and show the ship sinking in one piece). One notes that although it won ten Oscars to equal the record set nearly forty years ago by *Ben Hur*, they were almost all technical Oscars.

Walter Willis, 9 Alexandra Rd., Donaghadee, Co. Down, N. Ireland BT21 OGD

I was impressed by Tim Goodrick on *Titanic*. I wish I could take his advice about seeing it on a large screen, but the way I'm fixed these days it'll just have to be a tv screen. I have ordered a new tv with an extra wide screen, but I doubt if that will make a sufficient difference. Another point of difficulty is the sound. I have found my hearing has deteriorated to the extent that I cannot even follow the news bulletins on tv without the aid of teletext subtitles, so that while I am confident the film will be loud enough, I doubt if the dialogue will be distinct enough for me to follow. Certainly turning up the volume on the tv doesn't help. The other day I hired the tape of *Contact* and found it impossible to follow. I see it is possible to buy teletext subtitle readers for tapes, but now that my curiosity about *Contact*

has been assuaged I think I'll just wait for it to appear on Sky, where it will normally be subtitled.

Robert Lichtman, P.O. Box 30, Glen Ellen, CA 95442, USA

Tim Goodrick's best films article is somewhat suspect, because it appears from his list that he mainly sees Hollywood stuff - and in my opinion most of the best films coming out these days are made elsewhere. Personally, I thought *Titanic* sucked except for the shipwreck itself - I found it impossible to relate to the characters in the love story Cameron cobbled into the film. It turned the film into a big screen soap opera rather than an account of one of the all-time biggest maritime tragedies. As for *The English Patient*, I found it fairly hollow, not all that beautiful to look at (I prefer *Lawrence of Arabia* for desert scenery) and the characters curiously uninvolved. But then there's the trailer, a total cheat. There's one scene in it where in a close shot the English Patient is laying behind the Female Lead. It looks all romantic, but when you see that scene in the actual movie: the Female Lead is dead.

Much more interesting that way, I thought. Give me extreme tragedy over love scenes any day (in art, that is. In life, I prefer the opposite.) Titanic built up to enough emotional impact for me, despite the somewhat contrived nature of the love story - but it all ended badly too, so that was all right. But of course, it's all small beer compared to Spielberg's bloodfest Saving Private Ryan. The competition here seems to be to see who can come up with best story of its after-effects. Did you cry all the way home? Were you too shaken to start your car? Did you suddenly evince a need for deeply soothing music? Were you still in shock the next day at coffee time? I'm amazed that Spielberg could get so many people in to the cinema to go through to this kind of pain. Maybe we're all masochists at heart, or is it just a curiously compelling test of macho sensitivity? I'd quite like to see the film again, actually, but with my finger on the fast forward button for when it gets too much.

Lennart Uhlin, Hogsatrav 22, S-181 58, Lidings, Sweden (lennart@sfbok.se)

The meetings of the Bristol group sound a lot like the ones the Stockholm fandom have. We also meet every thursday, and this has been going on for more years than anyone can remember. Unfortunately the attendance and fannishness of these meeting has been going down over the last couple of years. Some months ago it was suggested that we should only meet the first thursday every month instead, to try to bring back the old vitality of the thing. So far this idea has proved somewhat successful. But a few fans still insists on going every thursday, so it's a bit unclear if we now have weekly or monthly meetings. Anyway, the big difference between your group and ours is that you do a fanzine, and a good one as well. How do you do that? What do you mean, you just tell people to write something, and they do it? Surely there's some black magic involved.

It's more than black magic. Generally it involves making people's lives a misery over a number of months - and even then they don't write anything. But there's always some pleasure to be got from the guilt-tripping process, I find.

For a brief period in the history of the Bristol SF group we did go on to fortnightly meetings, but people kept forgetting the right fortnight, and eventually we got so paranoid that there was an alternative group meeting on the Other Thursday that we went back to weekly meetings. And our drinking habits have never looked back!

The Pecadilloes interview was fun to read, even though I've never heard of the group before. I really liked the reason for doing it: "Just in the hope something bizarre and weird will happen". Usually when fans write about music the result is very poor. It's like they suddenly

have to pretend to be real journalists or something. So they write articles full of facts about the artist's or group's records, what the music sounds like and what the lyrics really mean. But they write nothing about themselves, nothing about how this music connects with their own lives and thoughts. And if the reader already likes the subject of the article, he already knows all the facts because he's read other, and better written, articles in real music magazines. If the reader is not familiar with the subject of the article, he just finds it aggressively boring. Your article works because you also write about your self.

I'm not really sure how well my article DID work - I think it went on too long for the casual reader with no interest in music (let's face it, 90% of fans). But I was trying to undermine the standard rock band interview in favour of a more "fannish" flavour.

Paul Hinder, 73a Claremont Road, Bristol

I was interested by what you had to say in BoB about fandom - "the tendency towards insularity and self-referentiality in out subculture". It's true of most subcultures, and you can easily see why in the context of an evening in the pub. A group of friends, out to relax after a hard day at the office/library/rodent disposal unit, whatever, do not particularly want to discuss anything heavy. So they talk about films they've seen, restaurants they might go to, (if they're SF fans) conventions they've attended, and most of all each other, people they know, who's sleeping with who etc. That's fine, but anyone who starts on about the anarchist philosophy of Iain Banks or the problem of homoeroticism in Samuel Delaney's novels is likely to be pounced on and silenced at once, or worse, asked to get the next round in. This is entirely understandable, but after a while it tends to result in people who actively want to discuss anything "heavy" getting bored and pissed off and not bothering to go any more.

Same at conventions, I suspect. Most people are out for a good time, meet their mates, get some - ok, lots of - beer in. These people, again, tend to discourage discussion of anything too serious that they can't cope with. As a result those that do hang on tend to discuss issues relevant to the majority of fans and this is what ends up in fanzines. By this time you've got a self-reinforcing process. No-one who's serious wants to contribute to fanzines, because they see the content as trivial.

People who run fanzines get defensive, because they see what they do as important. Fanzines begin to get devoted to justifying their own existence. But the fact is, if you're not a member of the subculture, reading a fanzine is like walking into a pub to meet a group of people you don't know, all of whom are talking about each other or things they did together. Even if people are kind enough to attempt to include you in the discussion, you can't join in, because, unless you know at least some of the people involved, there's no common ground left. In this way fandom has become an island - or at least a peninsula with a very narrow isthmus, guarded by dragons bearing glasses of beer.

I don't see any easy way out of this. The fact is, the majority of people *aren't interested* in the major themes of SF, or for that matter of literature in general, or philosophy, or human history. They may have views, and they may occasionally discuss them, but the most important thing in their lives is just the same thing that was most important to the intelligent chimpanzees we were 2 million years ago - who their friends are. If your friends are SF fans, then you're an SF fan. You may have got there because you liked Star Wars or Doctor Who or whatever, but it's the friends that are important now.

Which of course is just the way it should be. Friendship is the glue that binds society together, and without it those of us whose friendship capabilities have been eroded by

attention to more abstract concerns would probably starve to death. But social life isn't everything. We aren't chimpanzees any more. If you become so absorbed in the business of friendship - the gossip, the in-jokes, the "micro-politics" - that you forget what you came for, then you've got problems. So I guess the message from the dream factory is, we're really grateful for all the hard work you put in, and keep banging the beer glasses together, guys -- but please remember to look up at the stars once in a while, and remember why you came here.

*I think this is interesting because fandom - and specifically conventions - is one of the few places where you do find these intense late night conversations about Delaney, Banks et al. You should try one some day! Fanzines don't have to be all gossip and ephemera either. Get me to show you Bruce Gillespie's *Metaphysical Review*, for example, an awesomely literate fanzine and living proof that friendship and intellectual discussion need not be mutually exclusive.*

Jim Trash (jim@scream.demon.co.uk)

There are very few fanzines I could imagine referring to as hip or cool. Because of the insularity and self-referential nature of fandom it becomes instantly an anorak wearers hobby. It will always attract hordes of people who want to tell us how many cornflakes the real fan should have for breakfast and whether it is traditional to drink corflu with that.

Gotterdamerung is one of the few fanzines that I could happily show to other people on top of your Clapham Omnibus without fearing everyone will immediately mark me down as a complete geek. It's got edge, it's got playfulness and it's got real people doing real things. Show *Wild Heirs* to someone on that bus and they'd smile toothily at you whilst shuffling away looking around for avenues of escape. Of the Corflu fanzines you mention my favourite was Lilian's *Wrong Leggings* which seemed to have just the right mixture of fannish and personal to engage my attention.

I was thinking recently about some comments I've heard regarding the British fanzine scene being so much more 'vital' at the moment than the American. I don't think it's anything like as clear cut as that and from the incomplete samples I have there's no way I can judge. However if there's any truth in it, why would it be so? Jim's theory for today suggests that it may be connected with the insularity I mentioned up there somewhere. Compare it with, say, an office gathering in the pub after work. Everyone is sitting around having a few drinks sharing in-jokes about other people at the office and anecdotes are passed back and forth many of which would be of no interest to other people in the pub. If I'm in such a situation with work colleagues I quickly tire of this kind of chat and wish to move onto other things. It's often so much improved if partners are there too so that the breadth of conversation is improved and the in jokes gain more depth through being communicated in a more structured and pointed way.

Since Corflu I've been watching out for convention reports as due to being there I'd like to see some of what the other people were getting up to. I haven't seen one yet which I considered a particularly great report but I enjoyed reading them all because of the connection. My ideal though would be a convention report of Corflu that I would appreciate even if I hadn't been there but appreciate all the more because I was. Getting back to Jim's theory for today I reckon that the greyer fanzines may be that way due to this reliance upon the fannish connection rather than attempting to view the work in isolation as well as in a fannish context. Yes, fanzines are a celebration of fandom but for that colour and vibrancy that such as *Gotter* can achieve they have to also have enough depth and breadth that they don't rely entirely upon in-jokes and shared references.

Amanda Baker 70 Birchwood Gardens, Whitchurch, Cardiff, Wales, CF4 1HY

So, what is the excitement of fanzines, and why might it be easier to understand in the US? Having been a member of TWP (in particular) for some time and lurked on rasff and other Usenet groups for ten years, fanzines have begun to attract me as a medium with a fairly wide readership which are nonetheless fairly committed to what they do, and are interested in talking about just about anything in as serious or as irreverent a way as seems appropriate. After a childhood spent feeling unusual at best, and lonely and freakish at worst, fanzines look like an excellent way to keep in touch with the worldwide kindred spirits that conventions, student SF groups and Usenet have put me in touch with. Now I am in the privileged position of not only having a challenging career which regularly sends me on business trips half across the world, but I also have an excellent chance that there will be friends at my destination! Living in France and Germany for three years, with the attendant culture clash, and in small towns within walking distance of work, has often been rather lonely for Dave and I. Even when there is no local fandom, or otherwise conducive company to be found, and not much money for travel, AP Ae, the Net and now fanzines, are a good way to keep in touch, to keep sane in our own way.

And now that Amanda has moved to Cardiff, she has the potential of Thursday night excursions to Bristol to keep her "sane" too! What a wonderful world fandom is.

**Ted White, 1014 North Tuckahoe Street, Falls Church, VA 22046, USA
(tedwhite@compusnet.com)**

You know, "BoB" is awfully easy to confuse, at a glance, with Ian's "BOB." Is that why I see it referred to now as "BoverB"? Of course I tend to pronounce these things, and "boverb" sounds like a bovine verb....

We had the name first! I think... Personally BoverB does nothing for me as an abbreviation, but Steve Brewster used to like it, and who'd deny him his chance at trend-setting?

For whatever reason, I'm glad to see you back at the fanzine's helm. Despite BoB being a putative clubzine it always felt like your fanzine, perhaps because you've developed a feel for fanzine editing. And you write about fanzines. I cannot begin to tell you how much I appreciate that. You don't so much review as discuss fanzines, and even when I disagree with what you're saying (pace, Big American Fanzines) I'm glad to see you saying it, because entirely too few people are doing this sort of thing any more. (One of the joys of reading an old STOP BREAKING DOWN is reading Greg on fanzines. You don't need to have seen the fanzine, or even to already know of it, to enjoy what Greg has to say about it, because the points he makes are still valid and so well written.)

Which takes us to your discussion of the fanzines handed out at Corflu. It would appear from your list that I missed one -- DRUNKEN FUCKWIT 3.5 -- and that you missed one too, WIDENING GYRE #4. I would be interested in your take on Ulrika's fanzine -- and, for that matter, on the TAFF winner herself.

Widening Gyre was missed out because Ulrika never gave me a copy. I think with all the rushing around I was doing at Corflu and all the TAFF stuff Ulrika was doing, our schedules never coincided. I was hoping to catch up with her in Manchester at Eastercon and trade, but by the time I got my act together she'd already left.

But I applaud your concluding paragraph, which I think is solid and correct, although I'm not sure I'd draw the same conclusions about national differences in attitudes toward fanzines.

Here in the U.S. I find fanzines play a minor part in today's "fandom" and entirely too many American fanzines are crap, written to low standards. (I'm thinking of fanzines like LAN'S LANTERN.) Even those into which a lot of care is put, like MIMOSA, seem to be missing an essential element (in MIMOSA's case, an engaging editorial personality). British fanzines strike me as more literate and often more clever. But maybe this is a situation where the grass looks greener on the other side of the Atlantic....

I enjoyed the The Peadiloes section, although I learned less from it than I'd hoped. Amusing to read Nick's remark about "the true, innovative, wiry, almost punkoid prog of King Crimson." It's sad that most people are so ignorant of groups like Crimso that such a defensive remark was required. Nick's right, of course, that KC's "critics have probably never heard their really good stuff." And never did. Although ROLLING STONE's record guides retrospectively give KC some credit, that magazine consistently panned Crimso's albums of the seventies when they were released, and never had a clue about the band. Nick's comparison to Crimson makes me want to hear The Peadiloes, though. I wonder if their EP is available here. I'll have to check Tower....

Simon Lake seems to be setting us up for a bigger revelation or insight than he actually gives us. Is his "moment of clarity" simply the revelation that despite his feeling that charities paper over government failures he likes working for one? I expected more from his buildup in the opening paragraphs. Having just left a job where for three-plus years I did what amounted to "just another job," as Simon describes it, I have a few thoughts of my own. For most of my adult life I have not worked as "just another job." I've had very few mundane jobs. Since I worked at the Post Office in Baltimore at 20, I've mostly been a writer and an editor, sometimes salaried (if barely) and sometimes free-lance. There were brief stints working in the Scott Meredith Literary Agency (as the whole of "the large and expertly staffed" foreign rights department) and as the personal secretary to a millionaire coin dealer who played virtuoso violin while I worked on his correspondence, but my job at Logotel inputting data in a computer was my first taste of "just another job" since my Post Office days. Initially I looked forward to it. I found I was good at it, and I really liked the fact that I could leave my job each day at quitting time -- a luxury I'd never had in my years as a writer and editor. It was a positive relief to have "just another job," and one which made few creative demands on me. I was tired of being required to turn on my creativity like a faucet in order to earn a living. I was burned out by it.

But, funny thing, after a while I missed it. More than that, I missed the respect I'd always received for being uniquely creative. Doing "just another job" meant being just another worker, a replacable module in a company. I, who had once overseen a \$20,000-per-issue editorial budget at HEAVY METAL (back in 1980, when that was a Lot more money), was now a flunky, and getting increasingly less respect from my superiors (not one of whom could do the jobs I was doing under them). It became a two-way street: I had less and less respect for the middle-managers who insinuated themselves above me, whose mistakes it was my job to clean up. I enjoyed my peers and made many friends (and almost no enemies) on the job, but increasingly that friendship was a shared camaraderie over the oppression we all felt from above. I was not at all sorry to leave that job, and I hope I never have another like it.

Bill Bains, 101 Beechwood Ave, Melbourn, Royston, Herts SG8 6BW

Simon Lake appears to be under a misapprehension about charities and taxation. "The Rich" do pay more towards government supported social support, both indirectly through VAT and more relevantly directly through income tax, more both as a proportion of their income and

as an absolute amount. I suppose that Simon is therefore arguing that they should pay more more. Even this would not fill the "gap" he has identified. No government ever has provided for all of what its citizens or subjects believe they need. His own job experiences illustrate that they never will, because after the starving and the curably sick are removed from the portals of death, others want to be removed from the doorways of illness, disability, social maladjustment of all sorts, poverty, relative poverty, and most impossibly of all - boredom. Simon gave up a job as a VAT inspector and took up a post earning money for charity by harassing people on the phone. He does not pay "his share" of the national health service, police, fire brigade etc - his below average salary will pay far below average tax (the top 10% of earners, ie "the rich" pay around 40% of all income tax), and the charity will pay no corporation tax. He is, in effect, being sponsored by people like me (rich bankers) to give up a boring job and do an interesting one.

I work for what is in effect a specialist, elite bank - technically a seed stage venture capital company. As a direct result of the work of the ten of us about 100 jobs exist that would not have existed before, seven growing companies with good long-term futures have been founded, and, no, these jobs are not all for the University-trained technological elite (although most are). To be honest, I consider that more of a "difference" than the inherently resource-consuming, self-referential politics of social reform. Yes, I get paid well for it (not as well as stories about "City" salaries would have you believe, not by many factors of 10), and as a result pay lots and lots of tax.

Oh, and I never part with money over the telephone. Or as a result of Internet canvassing. Charity goes to where I can be reasonably sure it is not a scam, such as registered collectors in the street, a couple of regular subscriptions, Big Issue and buskers in London.

Lastly on Simon's article, be careful how you brandish the word "rights". In its modern usage this is an invention of the 1960s, and is a creation of political rhetoric, not of reality. Before that "rights" were the flip side of "duties". You had a duty to work and as a consequence a right to pay, some social protection etc... Many of these balances between rights and duties were hugely unequal in favour of the holders of economic power, which is what Marx meant when he spoke of the alienation of the worker from the product of their labour. The "rights" bit had been almost abolished. The solution, though, is not to abandon the "duty" aspect of the relationship. To what do groups in society genuinely have rights, and for what do they simply have wants? I do not know, I do not pronounce, I am not claiming rights or duties for anyone other than myself. I specifically do not wish to imply a belief that people with disabilities, without economic power, with non-WASP skins or religions should be treated differently as a result of their divergence from some mythical middle class ideal. I want simply to be clear by what reciprocal social arrangement these rights are asserted.

This is not hard to do. There are several reasons for, for example, conferring rights on animals that are not even potentially part of a society. We may believe them to have conscious minds, and further believe that all such minds should be treated as we wish our minds to be treated, because of self-interest, altruism, a belief in God or for any other reason. We may think that it is a small step from torturing animals needlessly to torturing people, and it is not a step we want to encourage others to take. We may consider the social organizations of animals to be equally meretricious as ours but orthogonal to it, and hence that neither should impose itself on the other. We may just think they are cute. But let's be explicit about what we believe and why. Phrases like "But at heart the majority [of charities] are still there to paper over huge cracks in government social policy, offering the poor and disadvantaged things that should be theirs by right" are so vague and content-free as to

constitute no more of a social or political programme than a particularly downbeat Bach prelude or a rainy landscape - all emoting.

Simon Lake replies :

Hey, what can I say. I'm so sorry. Now I just can't stop thinking about all those 'rich bankers' like yourself suffering to support the likes of me. I mean, how selfish could I have been?

You're spot on about people's 'rights' too. Let's get back to those good old pre '60s days right away. Back to a time when people with mental health problems were put in asylums. Back when gays and lesbians were treated as though they were suffering from some sort of medical illness. And since nearly a third of all children are currently living below the poverty line, how about sticking them up chimneys again. After all we have to balance rights with duties.

No, forget the VAT, working in the banking industry sounds much better to me. I mean where else could I get the chance to make huge profits from third world debt or invest in projects that are destroying the earth's resources?

Still, I do feel profoundly sorry for the fact that you have to pay 'lots and lots of tax'. Life's a bugger, eh?

Bill Bains continues:

Ah, Simon Lake is you brother --- I should have been ruder. I suffered from a brother, too. He is in publishing now. Is Ken Lake a brother as well? I think we should be told.

No, he most certainly isn't. But speaking of Ken...

Ken Lake, 36 Barrington Road, Loughton, Essex IG10 2AY

Thrilled to receive BoverB12, disappointed to find that (presumably as a reaction to Ikeafandom) it's been somewhat dumbed down and is aimed at a readership that pretty well excludes me (well, why not, if it keeps Bristol fen happy?)

It never keeps Bristol fen happy. It is their burden. I'm not sure what you mean by dumbing down or exclusion. But I suppose it could just be the mystic vibes of Ikea as its implantation in Bristol approaches. Now a point of information from Ken for the benefit of Yvonne Rousseau:

Algerian wine was imported in 1946, the first wine since 1939, because it was cheap and didn't cost hard currency. It cost 6s. at off-licences, and it was FOUL - harsh, full of lees, a serious shock to my sugar-starved generation who (as Orwell says in 1984) automatically thought of wine as being genteelly sweet.

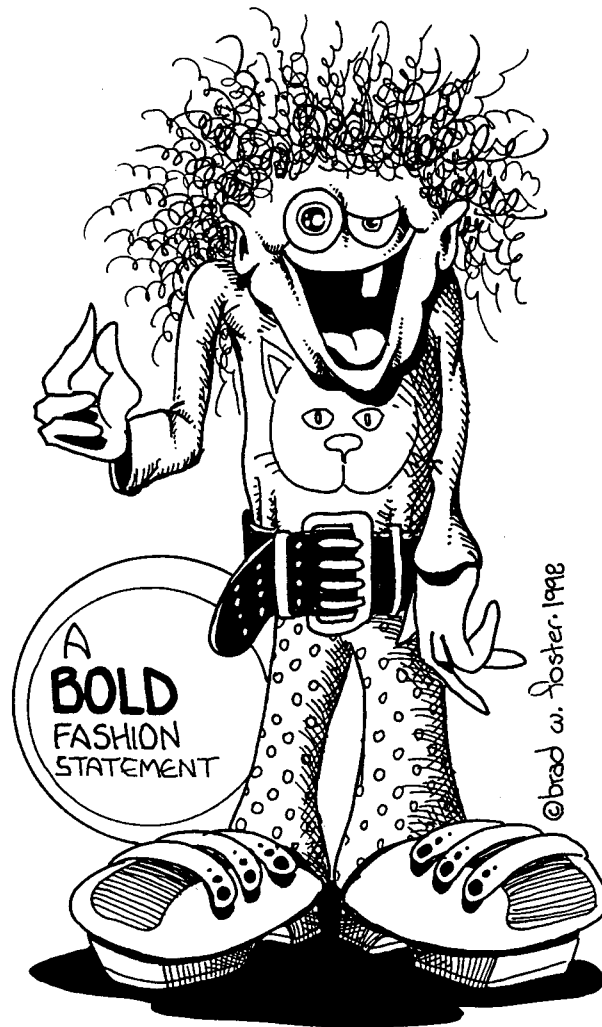
Finally, a blast from the past - a letter on Balloons Over Bristol 10:

Milt Stevens, 6325 Keystone Street, Simi Valley, CA 93063, USA

During my career with the Los Angeles Police Department, I've had many encounters with peculiar folk like Miss Lee (as described by Tim Goodrick). If I were to describe all my encounters, it would fill several issues of the fattest American Fanzines. While I was the captain's adjutant at Southwest Division, I had three psychos who called me every day and a couple of dozen others who sent cards, letters and occasional gifts (which were immediately turned over to the bomb squad). My initial reaction to psychos was something in the order of "Harmless". Later, I had to revise my assessment to "Mostly Harmless".

For instance, there was Ms. X. She called to report that her neighbors were pumping a colorless, odorless gas into her apartment, and the gas was making her sleepy. At the time of her first call, I didn't know that olfactory hallucination is a symptom of psychosis. I didn't immediately disregard her, because I know that ether was a feature of PCP sites. However, if there was enough getting loose into adjoining apartments, the entire place would be in imminent danger of being blown to bits. (When one urban PCP site blew it took out half a block of South Los Angeles.) My boss, Captain MacGarry, had the habit of going out and having tea with all the neighbourhood psychos. I never had a clue as to why he did it. Well, one morning he comes in, puts two 32 caliber automatics and 20 rounds of ammo on my desk and tells me to book them. So I go down to property and book them as excess property without any notion of where he got them. The previous evening he had gone over to have tea at Ms. X's apartment. While he was there, she not only complained about the gas, but said her neighbors were also jamming her guns. She had been trying to fire through the ceiling at her neighbors. Captain MacGarry expressed sympathy and offered to take the guns to our armory to have them checked out. Ms. X thanked him profusely, and he went on his way. While I was booking the guns, MacGarry was calling the men in the white coats to round up Ms X. immediately.

We also heard from: Brad Foster, Lloyd Penney, Yvonne Rousseau, Alan Sullivan. Thanks, guys - keep those letters coming!



Who's Who of the Bristol SF group

- Amanda** Token Scottish influence and BBC Bristol expert on aliens. Secretly edits a Strontium Dog fanzine.
- Brian** The group's beer festival organiser. Owns a share in the Brewery Tap (world-renowned home of the Bristol SF group), and is a major contributor to their profits.
- Christina** Sister of the more famous Simon
- Dave & Dalva** Proof that opposites attract! Dalva is a Brazilian party goddess famous for attacking people with mauve lipstick kisses, while Dave prefers a quiet night in with a book.
- Dave & Jenny (aka The Raggetts)** Known for inventing the World Wide Web (almost), children (2 of them), weird furniture painting and 900 guinea pigs.
- Jane** Most outrageous member of the group. Used to expose her boobs at the slightest provocation. Now makes people take pictures of her bump (aka Baby Jane) instead
- Ken** Reformed character who has now bought 2 rounds of beer!
- Martin** Gave up coming down the group on Thursdays for Morris Dancing!
- Nathan** Only balloonist ever to appear in *Balloons Over Bristol*. Now under contract to work less hours in a year than most of us work in a week.
- Nick** Can't stop writing once he's had 2 pints of lager. Soon to be famous.
- Paul** Already famous.
- Pete B** Part of the great Pete diaspora. Now lives in Scheveningen with his gadgets
- Pete C.** Once a chum of Nigel Richardson. Recipient of the Ernest Hemmingway Medal of Honour" (for conspicuous services to the sex industry) at the Amsterdam party. Now lives in Yorkshire with psycho girl friend.
- Ranger Doug** Fortean Scottish influence. Friend of Pete and Sue's from Aberdeen days who mysteriously turned up in Christina's house one night and never went home.
- Richard** The man with the beeper that could mean the end of civilisation as we know it (or merely a flat battery). When not on call for the local nuclear power station, chain drinks gin and tonic
- Simon** Recipient of Jane's boobs, even though he has promised to marry Dalva's sister
- Steve "I'll be back in Bristol in a fortnight" Brewster** Resident in Leeds since January.
- Sue** Sister of the less famous Steve Mowbray. Drives sporty black car that looks dead cool except when Richard's head is poking out the sun roof.
- Tim** Used to be fun before he went on a diet. Still watches all night baseball and plays with computerised lego robots.
- Tina** Garden dictator and connoisseur of chewy beers. Recently voted "person most likely to have a bathroom party before the end of 1998"