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DISCUSSION
WITH JOHN HALAS

PATRICK McGOOHAN
DANGER MAN



MOVIE COMICS

DANGER MAN



Before *The Prisoner* there was *Danger Man*. A key figure in the popularity of both programmes was their star, Patrick McGoochan. *Jon Abbott* looks back at the taut and tough TV exploits of John Drake, *Danger Man*—Patrick McGoochan's secret agent apprenticeship for *The Prisoner*.

Like most of the surviving U.K. television series of the past, *Danger Man* was originally made to make money in the all-important U.S. market. In those early days no-one was remotely interested in "television history", and certainly not the small amount of "old TV" that was being accumulated. Many TV shows, including classic episodes of *Hancock's Half-Hour* and *Doctor Who* amongst many others, were 'wiped', and new programmes recorded over them. Consequently, those series that survive today are mostly the filmed ones made for the U.S. syndication market.

The pioneer of television exports was undoubtedly Lew Grade, the man best known to fantasy buffs for putting up the money for Gerry Anderson's legendary puppet series. Grade worked from ATV in the midlands, and formed the Independent Television Corporation (ITC) in 1960, after the success of a number of half-hour adventure shows, sold abroad mainly as cheap time-fillers.

Having fixed his sights on the big three networks in the states, ABC, NBC and CBS, which was where the money was, he specialised in imitations of U.S. formats during the sixties even though, ironically, he began by also exploiting the American envy of Britain's colourful history as well.

The first U.K. series made for syndication was *Robin Hood* in 1955. This was not only plundered mythology for folk heroes for British youngsters, but had the dual benefit of exploiting American interest in British history. This was followed in 1955 with *The Buccaneers*, starring Robert Shaw, and *Sir Lancelot*, with William Russell (later *Doctor Who*'s first companion, teacher Ian Chesterton). However, *William Tell* (with Conrad Phillips) and *Charlie Chan* (with J. Carroll Naish) did not do as

well. By this time, the Americans were exploiting their own folk heroes in similarly rose-tinted fashion, and just about every potential adventurer from *Superman* to *Kit Carson* was being featured in TV adventures. Grade was not deterred though; as late as 1963, *Richard The Lionheart* was in production, with Dermot Walsh as King Richard, a 'hero' surely on par with America's 1967 *Legend Of Custer*!

In 1957, producer Ralph Smart came up with *The Invisible Man*, a show complete with an anonymous actor in a heavy coat that rather obviously covered his head as well as his body! These were the early days of TV though, and both British and American audiences were impressed. On the strength of this, Smart and Grade came up with *Danger Man*, which made its U.S. debut in 1961... and sunk without trace. Retitled *Secret Agent* (although still known as *Danger Man* in the U.K.), the show was extended to an hour-length format, given a new springy theme (by Edwin Astley, who wrote the music scores for most of Grade's sixties adventure shows)... and took off.

Watching *Danger Man* today is rather like looking at the performance of a middle-aged athlete or elderly dancer – you have to understand the age factor and respect them for what they achieved in their day, rather than judging them by present standards of sophistication. In its day, *Danger Man* was classy, top-notch entertainment, rather superior to many contemporary series. The plots were new and original, the obvious resolutions were twist endings, and the stilted dialogue was delivered by good actors. The production values were good for the period, even though today TV techniques have progressed so far as to make the show display its age rather obviously. Yet still its virtues – McGoochan's strong, understated performance, the shadowy, moody camerawork, the lack of story padding, the absence of silliness, if not contrivance – shine through. The show may not belong in the category of timeless television, but it deserves its place in the archives as the best of its kind.

SPY VS SPY

Danger Man had the good fortune to debut in America shortly before the film debut of James Bond in *Doctor No* and the subsequent spy craze that was to follow, with a surfeit of such spy dramas as *I Spy*, *The Man From U.N.C.L.E.*, *The Wild, Wild West*, *Amos Burke* – *Secret Agent*, *Honey West*, and many others. Although the first series of half-hour episodes came and went in its intended American market without causing much of a ripple, by the time the revamped 60-minute version hit U.S. screens in the summer of 1965,

the public were ready for the adventures of British Intelligence agent John Drake, as played by actor Patrick McGoochan.

McGoochan was a very straight-laced, direct and opinionated man, with strong views on television, politics and morality. Unlike James Bond and *UNCLE* agent Napoleon Solo, the character of John Drake had little time for women – McGoochan had insisted that a bedroom scene early in the series was written out, and none had appeared subsequently. Whereas the *James Bond* films were hopelessly sexist, and the *UNCLE* films, while not exactly offensive, indulged in the sixties sexual attitudes of the day toward women as an attractive diversion, both *Danger Man* and McGoochan's follow-up series, the legendary *The Prisoner*,

me". Crooked officials, defiant women, ruthless terrorists and cowardly double-agents all withered and fell at his steady gaze, staccato dialogue and right hook.

Many of the guest-stars in *Danger Man* were actors McGoochan had worked with in his previous film career; Patrick Wymark, Laurence Naismith, William Sylvester, Raymond Huntley, Duncan Lamont, and others. Other guest stars included Robert Shaw (*The Buccaneers*), Dermot Walsh (*Richard the Lionheart*), Wendy Craig (before her sit-com fame), Jean Marsh (*Upstairs, Downstairs*), Honor Blackman (*The Avengers* and *Goldfinger*), Lois Maxwell (Miss Moneybags in the *Bond* films and the voice of Lt. Atlanta in *Stingray*), and Alan Wheatley (well-known for many years as the villainous



might almost have been considered misogynist. In both series, women were either not to be trusted, menial appendages to the men, or both! Drake was no womaniser, and McGoochan allowed no sexual overtones in either series. Neither would Drake carry a gun considering them "ugly, oily things", although he did acquire a number of *Bond*-like gadgets during the later days of the series. His two clenched-fists solved most of his problems.

Each week, Drake would turn up in one foreign country or another, often in disguise, put right an international situation or diplomatic incident in thirty minutes, and disappear at the end of it. It was never quite made clear who he was working for – the opening narration referred to "a dirty job", and someone's got to do it – "that's when they call on me... or someone like

Sheriff Of Nottingham in *Robin Hood*). Some, such as George Coularis, Derrin Nesbitt and others, would later turn up in *The Prisoner*. Other guest stars turned up more than once; Donald Pleasance, Hammer film veteran Michael Ripper, and the then-unknown Warren Mitchell (TV's Alf Garnett) all appeared twice in the half-hour series. One amusing characteristic of the series is now-familiar faces, such as Mitchell, Ripper and John Woodvine turning up playing foreigners with names like Miguel, Abdul, and Luigi, or whatever, which didn't help credibility at all!

More recent repeats also brought other problems with credibility which were a little more bizarre than the inevitable ancient music score or unsophisticated back projection techniques. In the episode *An Affair Of State*,