Michael Craze
Changing Doctors...

As Seaman Ben Jackson and Polly Wright were the "swinging Sixties" Doctor Who companions who oversaw the regeneration of William Hartnell into Patrick Troughton and provided precious stability while the audience became used to a new leading man. TV Zone recently caught up with Michael Craze, alias Ben, and shared a pleasant pub lunch while digging for a few thoughts on the series.

How was he cast in the role? "In those days I'd get probably six calls a week for casting sessions. I'd already done films and some television, but I'd been away in repertory in Harrogate and Norwich to get more experience in straight theatre. When I returned, I got a call one week to go for a Doctor Who audition. That was as far as I was concerned — I didn't realize it was for an ongoing part. I got given the War Machines script by Innes Lloyd, the producer, and when I began reading it became evident I was going to be taking over from Peter Purves as the companion. "I had to go back for another interview with Michael Ferguson, the director of my first episodes. This involved a prepared speech, and as I'd recently done Chips With Everything in theatre, I did a monologue from that. They probably saw about a hundred and fifty actors for the part, but they knew what they wanted, and I happened to fit the bill at the time."

Young Companions

Ben and Polly were markedly different from previous assistants aboard the TARDIS — younger, trendier and more dynamic. "I think Peter Purves, and William Russell before him, had been a bit up-market, and they wanted to bring the series more into line with the Sixties. Society was going more working class and people were becoming much more open — you weren't expected to have a plum in your mouth and speak posh. I think the producers wanted the girl in particular to represent Sixties fashion and appeal to an older market."

So what did Michael think of his character? "Ben was a good guy. He sided with the goodies, so he appealed to the kids. My son, who's now twelve, watch 'The Mighty Morphin Power Rangers, and he's always on the side of the goodies. So there wasn't a whole lot more to it. Ben wasn't really allowed to develop. In that kind of programme, you're only allowed a narrow strip to work within, so we concentrated on developing a personality."

"We all tried to establish characters, but you'd get a new set of writers every six episodes, and they'd invariably get the character all wrong. You'd have to say, 'No, they wouldn't talk to each other like that.' We didn't have a lot of input into the scripts beyond that."

A Team

Ben and Polly were always a team — they joined together, and they left together. Was there ever a hint of romance? "People always ask that! I don't think it was ever intended, and we didn't play it that way at all. They were two completely disparate people. Polly was a bit more saucy than Ben. There was also quite a height difference, as we discovered at the first photo call! I'm 5'7", and Anneke Wills is 5'10" and very willowy."

"I met Anneke again when she came over to England recently. She's a great girl, an interior artist now. We had fun on the series; we were great mates off the set. She had a completely different social life to mine, and came from the same kind of background as Polly, but we were on the same wavelength and socialized quite a bit. She's now gone back into hiding in Canada."

Ben's outfits never quite had the same flair as Polly's... "Oh, we had good fun with the costumes. He used to get around in military jackets and all that, which was the norm on the King's Road in the Sixties. One time we went down to Jaeger, in Regent Street I think, and bought two pairs of very expensive trousers and tops for the scene where I walked the plank in The Highlanders. I had to go into the water tank, so we needed two costumes in case it went wrong the first time. They were about £200 a pair — for a one-off!"

The Fans

Funnily enough, I went to Birmingham for a convention earlier this year and renewed my acquaintance with the costume designer, Alexandra Tynan [aka Sandra Reid]. She was mad as a march hare!"

"How does Michael find meeting Doctor Who fans? "Conventions daunt me because I can't remember the scripts that far back. We're talking nearly thirty years ago. The fans have access to what videos are left, so they dig into various scenes, and you're on stage thinking, 'Oh God!'"

What about public recognition when he was in the series? "You got a certain amount of recognition, but I think I got more later on in the Seventies when I did Crossroads. That was a dreadful series, the forerunner of Neighbours and all the rest of that rubbish. We used to do five programmes in four days, so consequently you saw actors drying and sets wobbling. It used to go out at six o'clock on a week-day. We filmed in Birmingham, and I was a particularly nasty character, having a tiff with my father. I remember once I was meeting someone in a pub, and this guy came up to me, took me by the throat and said, 'If you ever speak to your father like that again...!' I tried to calm him down, but went on with it. But you did get nice recognition from Doctor Who."

Difficult Doctor

A lot has been written about William Hartnell, who played the first Doctor. Many people found him priggish and difficult to work with... "He was a difficult old sod, but you have to remember that in the Sixties, youth was virtually taking over. He didn't like that at all. He was an old-school actor, and he was rather bit- ter because he hadn't made it as a big-time film star, as a lot of his peers did. He was a racist as well. We had a coloured actor in The Tenth Planet, and he was particularly nasty about that."

"We all went out for a dinner together once and he was quite a different person, but on set he strode around like a school master: 'You'll do this, you'll do that. If I move here, you'll go there...!' He was a silly old bugger who you just had to tolerate. I don't think he was very well, and he probably deteriorated in the break before we shot the last one."

Only three stories after Ben entered the
series, a huge gamble was taken in recasting the lead actor for the first time. What was the feeling at the time, and did the on-set atmosphere change? "Once we knew Bill was going, there was great speculation about his replacement. It was a very exciting time, really. There were so many names bandied about."

"The atmosphere changed completely when Pat Troughton was cast. Pat, Anneke and I all used to socialize, and it became great fun to go into work. Pat’s original conception was the off-quoted cosmic hobo, with his tall hats and whiskers and so forth. It was great fun, but quickly squashed. The management thought he was going too far, and he probably was.”

Packed Time Machine

Frazier Hines was then added to the cast as Jamie. Were things becoming a bit crowded in the TARDIS? “Obviously, one didn’t have as much dialogue, but it didn’t even worry me because that was the way the writers wanted it to go. You had to accept it really. They had these theories moving all the time, so they changed the companions every year or so. When I knew I was leaving, I asked [Lloyd, the producer] if I could be Ben off, but you really couldn’t in those days. Now, you’d have a fire, or a plane drop out of the sky or something, but children’s television back then didn’t have anything so violent.”

The monsters of the time caused quite a stir, many of them still fondly-remembered today. “The Daleks had already created history by the time I arrived, I was there at the outset of the Cybermen. Katreder conceived them, but they didn’t work at first because they hadn’t been properly developed. It was all tennis balls, bits of tubes and sello-tape, such a laugh to work with. They made them properly when they returned. The Macra was a good concept as well, but it never really worked. It was so big it was difficult to work with.”

Guest Stars

The Troughton era saw more “guest stars” appear, a policy which would remain with the programme throughout the rest of its run. “There were a lot of good fan special guests who came in. Patrick Troughton in The Moonbase” was a great star with Joseph Furse, the producer from The Underwater Menace, was good fun — he was mad! I also remember one interview

BEN JACKSON
A LIFE OF ADVENTURE

Like many young men who join the navy, Ben Jackson was eager to see the world and get in on the action. Following his chance meeting with the mysterious Doctor in the War Machines, Ben was given a far bigger share of the action than he ever had imagined and would see not only much of this world but several others as well.

According to the character description devised by Doctor Who Script Editor Gerry Davis and Productor Princes Lloyd, a twenty-four-year-old Able Seaman whose area of expertise was radar. His father was also a sailor during the war and became a deck-crane operator the first hostilities were over. When Ben’s father died and his mother married again, Ben found his new stepfather to be unsympathetic. Unhappy, he stowed away on a cargo ship but was soon returned home. Inspired by his father, Ben trained as a school child from the age of thirteen and entered the navy as soon as he was of age. A keen boxer and athlete, Ben was as proficient as anyone could be for a life of adventure with the Doctor.

Following the defeat of the WOTAN super computer the War Machines, Ben accompanied Secretary Polly to the TARDIS, where he met the Doctor, he was somewhat resentful of being kidnapped. Ben was somewhat surprised to discover that the Doctor’s regeneration meant a completely different person. Although Polly needed little persuading, it took some time before Ben could finally accept that the comical little man with dark hair was indeed the Doctor and not an impostor.

With the new Doctor, Ben’s adventures continued in Power of the Daleks where he met the Doctor’s new companion on the planet Vulcan. After burning eighteenth Century Culloden, Ben found himself in the fossilised Atlantic of the near future in The Underwater Menace. They journeyed far further in Time, Ben once again encountered the Cybermen on the Moon where, along with Polly, he successfully imposed a weapon deadly to the silver giants. The Doctor praised his brave efforts.

Surviving the mind control techniques of the Cybermen and the Master of the Moon, Ben was relieved to find the TARDIS had landed in present day Gallifrey airport, and after the alien Cybermen were defeated, he and Polly discovered it was the very same day that they had begun their travels. They chose to return to their own time and said goodbye to the Doctor.

Dee Baker, who joined Doctor Who at the TARDIS, it seems unlikely that Ben and Polly were ever more than friends. Essentially different people with different lives, the two would make an unlikely couple. However, their travels with the Doctor were certainly not one-sided. Ben had forged a unique bond of friendship. It seems likely that Ben would have returned to the Doctor and the companions and any equally peaceful life it offered.

John Answorth

I didn’t enjoy working with: silly old Robert Beatty from the first Cybermen story, he couldn’t remember a bloody word, and he was always smoking negroes!”

What about behind the camera? “I didn’t care much for Derek Marjins; he was a bit too didactic. Morris Barry did some — he was old then, so God knows how old he is now! He was a nice old boy. He came to use a music stand on which he put all of his directions. ‘John Davie was superb. I worked with him afterwards at Anglia. He was a great mate of mine. Gerry Mill I knew socially as well. We always used to go around as twins, because although he’s much taller than me, we’ve got exactly the same features. Julia Smith I recall tended to get a bit hysterical. At one point she was in floods of tears because something had gone wrong. She went on to do EastEnders and didn’t employ me, the bat! I tried writing to her, but she wouldn’t have it.”

Michael doesn’t appear to have wonderful memories of The Underwater Menace...

‘That was a terrible script. It didn’t work. The production didn’t get it either, I don’t think it went through properly. I always liked the historical ones better — I thought they were more interesting for the kids.”

Still Who Connections

Ben left in the 1967 story The Faceless Ones. Would he have stayed if asked? “At the time, I’m sure I would have done. I had nothing particularly to go on to. In fact, I don’t think I worked for the BBC for some considerable time after that.”

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