Dr. Who brings a new dimension to space

By BILL DeYOUNG
Of the Sun Staff

He's suave like Bond, yet as bumbling as Clouseau. His steel-trap mind, well-oiled and poised to ambush evil, can bring him the cerebral satisfaction of Sherlock Holmes, and into bigger messes than Johnny Quest. He's a super sleuth. He's cool, campy, terrific, and terrifically stupid all at once. He's Dr. Who, and he's been sleuthing his way across British television screens for 20 years.

"It's so hokey, it's great," Ron Katz says of the TV series bearing the good doctor's name. "It's so out, it's in." As president of the "Dr. Who Fan Club of America," Katz is the acknowledged "Head Whovian" for this part of the world. The corny English series about a "renegade Time-Lord" (airing six days a week on Channel 5) has earned Katz a comfortable living since he began his club one year ago: it now boasts 10,000 members.

Katz is currently traveling around the country, plugging "Dr. Who" and his fan club through the program's public TV carriers. He'll be in Gainesville Sunday at 1 p.m. to ringmaster a "mini-festival" of Dr. Who trivia-philes, at the University of Florida's Carleton Auditorium.

"What I'll be doing is introducing two new shows," Katz explains, "Ones that haven't aired yet, featuring Peter Davidson as the new Doctor."

"Dr. Who" is the longest-running science fiction series in history, having first aired on BBC-1 November 23, 1963. It concerns a gentleman from the planet Gallifrey, circa the 310,000th century. He and his friends travel through time and space via a (defective) time-machine called TARDIS (Time and Relative Dimensions in Space), shaped like a 19th-century London Police-Box. Along the way, he encounters villains, space monsters, mad scientists, and merciless robots — in short, more low-budget goons than James T. Kirk, or even June Lockhart, ever had to deal with.

That's "Dr. Who" on the surface — another cheap sci-fi show. Fortunately, the series is written with tongue firmly in cheek, albeit without the clumsy wordiness of "Hitch-Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy." It has developed a huge cult following since its debut on American Public TV two years ago, a fact not lost on Ron Katz.

"People ask if Whovians are like Trekkies," Katz says, referring to the rabid group of "Star Trek" fans circulating in America. "I think that Trekkies are more partial to science fiction, while Dr. Who fans are, in one way or another, interested in theater.

"It's definitely an older audience," he continues. "Whovians include professors, doctors, businessmen, people from all walks of life."

The program went through two lead actors in England (due, by way of explanation to the audience, to Who's regenerative ability, but in actuality because the first actor had died) before catching on. "It was very much a week-to-week operation," Katz explains. "It was low budget, filler stuff for BBC."

The 'craze' began when they introduced the Daleks. Most people I know think the Daleks are about the dumbest thing going. But you remembered them. All of a sud-

(See MORE: DR. WHO on Page 25)
den, people were walking around in England with things on their heads going 'Exterminate! Exterminate!.' That got their attention, definitely."

Katz says the awareness changed. When the program was tried out on U.S. audiences seven years ago, it flopped. Public TV got hold of it in 1980, and, with the right promotion, the show begat Whovians on this side of the Atlantic.

"When we first got into it, we couldn’t tell our kids," Katz says, "it was very much a closet-case thing. After a while, my partner and I realized there might be a future in promoting Dr. Who in America."

When the British fan club failed to satisfy him ("Cheap T-shirts" Katz scoffs), he quit the men’s clothing business and began the Dr. Who Fan Club of America. It has just celebrated its first birthday.

"I’m now doing what I’d dreamed that I would most liked to for a living," Ron Katz extolls. "Sometimes I think I am an old teen-ager, but I don’t like to think about it ever ending."

Advance tickets for the Whovian Festival are available at the Reitz Union Box Office, today and Saturday, for $3. They’ll be $4 at the door Sunday. All proceeds from ticket sales will go to WUFT Channel-5.