By John Peel

At a very recent convention in San Jose, the attendance figures had crept up to 1,500 when it was suddenly confirmed that Tom Baker, the fourth actor to portray Doctor Who, would be present. Attendance figures shot up to 4,000 almost overnight. What had been planned as a fairly modest convention suddenly turned into a raging event, and clearly simply because of the addition of Baker.

This is but a single small and recent example of one large factor in fandom: hero-worship. Tom Baker’s presence can command a legion of fans. The same is true of the third Doctor, Jon Pertwee, and the sixth, Colin Baker, who has already built up a sizeable fan following, though few stations in the US have as yet broadcast his stories.

Heroes have always been a part of popular appeal of both stories and series for millennia; the first known hero was The Epic of Gilgamesh, the fascinating account of the adventures of a King, which is almost seven thousand years old. Heroes have been around for a long time—Jason and the Argonauts, Robin Hood, Wyatt Earp, and now folks like Captain Kirk and Doctor Who. Part of the appeal is certainly the need we have for heroes to look up to. Despite Tina Turner’s song, we always need another hero. Fresh situations demand fresh heroes.

Jon Pertwee during his days as the Doctor recorded a song called “Who Is the Doctor,” with a line I find very significant: “With sword of truth I turn to fight/ The Satanic powers of the night.” The Doctor is the Hero, ready and able to fight the foe with right and justice on his side, the champion of mankind. This sort of story goes way back to the myths and legends of primitive mankind. The Hero is one who takes on the tasks that the average person simply cannot perform. The Hero is the Saviour, wielding his sword of truth to rescue everyday man. To the average person, there’s just too much to attempt to cope with by himself. This doesn’t only mean the powers of darkness, but also more commonplace menaces. Whenever the Doctor faces down some bureaucratic or, insisting on forms being filled out in triplicate, the Doctor invariably sends him packing. We can never do that, of course—life just isn’t like that. But the Doctor, an alien, an outsider, can be cheeky, insulting and put down those self-righteous pompous asses without any problem.

His role as Hero is larger than that, of course. Sometimes he is called upon to save a planet, and even occasionally to save the whole of time and space. He can face Daleks, Cybermen, Sontarans and other monsters that would be quite sufficient to kill anyone. Not only does the Doctor survive, he comes through with a smile on his lips, a song in his heart, and his companions more or less intact (with the notable exception of Adric). He not only saves his own life, but those of most of the innocents who trust in him. All in fine, heroic mould, of course.

Another aspect of his heroicism is his giving his life to save those he is concerned to protect. The fifth Doctor can die saving Peri’s life, because this is how a Hero lives and dies. He is selfless and generous. He is a truly Heroic gesture, and one that the Doctor can make time and time again, since he is able to regenerate. The interesting side of this is that he can give his all, and still return, albeit in a new shape and form. (This idea was also taken up by Robin of Sherwood, killing off Michael Praed and bringing in Jason Connery.) The fact that he can return does not diminish his heroism one whit, because it is never easy to sacrifice like this.

To play a hero, the actor involved has to be of larger than life status himself. With Doctor Who, the show has been inestimably helped by finding actors who have such expansive personalities—if not in real life, then certainly when the cameras began to roll. The first Doctor, William Hartnell, had tremendous screen presence. I once spoke to his widow, Heather Hartnell, about this. She told me that the Boulting Brothers, for whom he had made a number of films, had told him to stop looking at the camera when anyone else was speaking; it seemed that all eyes tended to go towards him when he looked out at the audience! This almost hypnotic gaze he possessed served him well when he became the Doctor.

With Jon Pertwee adopting the role, the Doctor almost reflected the actor here. Pertwee is a very active person, despite his sixty-plus years and a bad back. He never wants to slow, is filled with adventure and a very real personal charm, all of which he brought to the show. It has been widely said that his Doctor was more like James Bond than anyone, and in many ways this is true. He projected the protector image very strongly and believably. Children and many adults felt that whenever he walked into a scene, things would become right and proper once again. Virtually never showing fear, he projected an aura of confidence and competence despite the occasional slip-ups.

With Tom Baker, probably the most popular and successful actor to have played the part, the Heroism was mixed with an alieness. Though all previous Doctors had seemed alien, somehow Baker had a mysterious quality that set him apart from them, and very apart from us. “I’m a Time Lord,” he announced in “Pyramids of Mars,” “I walk in eternity.” You could believe this, too, he seemed as if his emotions were totally unhuman. He alternately admired and despised the human race, saving it and yet attacking it verbally for its follies. He was the impartial outside observer, commenting cynically upon its follies, yet always willing to lay down his life to save it.

Baker’s complex and challenging characterization led to his widespread acceptance and adulation in the U.S. He was a different sort of hero—sex appeal, yet without a sexual thought in his
head. He was adventurous without ever seeming to think about heroism. He was willing to lay down his life for men whilst arguing that they are not worth it. He is a paradox, yet a very compelling paradox. His appearance on the American television scene set a torch that many still carry high (as witness the San Diego convention attendance). To many fans, Tom Baker is the Doctor.

Such hero worship can at times be embarrassing to the actors and the show, and is occasionally taken too far. It happens on other series also, of course—David McCallum was almost torn apart by crazed fans of Ilya Kuryakin when touring to promote *The Man From U.N.C.L.E.* the Beatles could never appear solely in public, either. Fan-worship often leads to some strange excesses, such as tearing the clothing from their idol to get a souvenir of the star, as happened to Roger Moore in his time as *The Saint.* Fans, it would seem, can be physically dangerous!

At other times, a grim attachment to a certain star can make a person miss the merits of other actors and other shows. Whist "Trekies" are notorious for their love of *Star Trek* and their dislike of any other shows, the same sometimes happens with Who fans. When it became apparent that the BBC was considering removing John Nathan-Turner as producer of *Doctor Who,* the response of some fans was that if JNT went, they would never watch the show again. It didn’t matter to them whether the move would be good or bad—as fans of JNT, they were only interested in maintaining the status quo.

As a child, I noted the thought of William Hartnell regenerating into some other actor, and thus boycotted Patrick Troughton for two years—a move I now kick myself for; I missed a number of excellent shows with such a decision. Fandom can very often be a good thing. This magazine is the result of the fandom involved in *BATUS,* so I certainly have no intention of saying that fandom is a bad thing! Like all good things, fandom can be taken to excesses, but for the most part fandom is a good thing. It brings together people with similar interests, and similar backgrounds. It shows fans that however they are often despised, there are many others like themselves who enjoy the same things. It even brought my wife and I together, and that I would certainly consider a very strong endorsement for fan activities.

Besides all of that, of course, it’s fun! That is probably the best reason to become involved in any kind of fandom—sheer enjoyment. It’s a way to get hold of information, pictures and other material about favorite stars and shows. My own collection of *Doctor Who* stuffs and so forth grew directly from my involvement in the *Doctor Who Appreciation Society.* It comes in very handy for my work nowadays.

Is your favorite Tom Baker or Patrick Troughton? Jon Pertwee or Colin Baker? William Hartnell or Peter Davison? Or even the almost-forgotten Peter Cushing? It hardly matters, sometimes because they are all Heroes. All of them have those qualities worth looking up to. And in the act of admiration, it can sometimes inspire us to look upwards within ourselves. We can produce greater works for ourselves.

For me, the interesting part of the Doctor as hero has been his dichotomy. He can be caring or uncaring about his companions. He can be willing to save the world, or to let it go to hell in a handcart. He can be frantic or indifferent. The Doctor is composed of many moods, as we all are, yet those many moods seem to make up a single individual. There is a compulsion about the Doctor that often does not exist about other heroes.

Part of this compulsion is change. It seems that not a single year has gone by in the show without changes of some kind. Sometimes it is the change of lead actor, as the Doctors regenerate. At others, it is the change in supporting characters as one companion bows out and another enters. Sometimes it is a change of script-editor and writers, and at other times, it is the change of the producers involved in the series. Though it might seem as though such changes would jar the show and result in its ruin, in fact such changes over the years have almost always infused fresh blood and creativity into the show. There have been times where the changes have been retrograde, of course, but magnanimously few over the years. Most changes have been lateral ones—the show has not dramatically improved or degenerated, but it has changed.

Through these changes, the Doctor has gone on and grown in wisdom and complexity. Try as you might, you cannot nail the Doctor down into a simple pattern. But there is one thing of which you can always be certain. He’s a Hero. And we always need another Hero. Don’t we?

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