The Magnetic Dr. Who
Trekkies have nothing on the groupies who worship this WCET character

By Sabrina Nelson

There's a doctor in town who still makes house calls. Thousands of them, in fact. Every Saturday night at 10 p.m.

Who?

Exactly.

Dr. Who is a science fiction television show produced by the British Broadcasting Corporation and aired by WCET, Channel 48. It's a bit more than just another Lost in Space, though. The Doctor has a growing national and local following, and many of his fans — known as Whovians — do more than simply watch the program. They pay to keep the show on the air. For WCET, Dr. Who has been just the right prescription.

The Doctor has been adventuring on the airwaves here in Cincinnati since May 5, 1985. "For as long as I've been here," says Grace Hill, director of programming for WCET, "we had been getting calls from all over the area — Kentucky and Indiana — asking us to please, please air Dr. Who. "We had screened it many times. We wanted to have it, but we just couldn't afford it."

A year of features costs $35,000, and the United States distributor, Lionheart Television International, keeps a tight rein on the show. Unlike Sesame Street, or Nova, which can be re-run several times, most episodes of Dr. Who can be shown only once during the contract period.

In spite of the costs and restrictions, WCET decided to take the plunge. "Other stations and Lionheart told us we would have no problem [raising money for the show]. And they were right. Viewers did respond."

Anne Cox-Espenlaub, chancellor of the local Dr. Who fan club (The Friends of the Time Lord), says there is no "typical" Whovian. "We have people here who are in their 40s, we have people here who are pre-teensagers. We have children of members who are also avid Who fans. We have people who are housewives and birdwatchers and people who are comic book collectors, and we have a few divinity students in the group — a real broad cross-section of the Cincinnati population."

According to Cox-Espenlaub, people join the club for the fellowship and to be part of something bigger than just individual enjoyment of a television show. The local club is not affiliated with the national Dr. Who Fan Club of America, although many members of the local group are also involved in the national organization. The local club meets once a month, usually attracting about thirty people from as far as Dayton and Batavia. They talk about the show and share inside scuttlebutt about upcoming tours and other Whovian gossip. They celebrate the show with Hal-Who-ween and Who Year's Eve parties. And they work — from manning the phones at WCET's fund raisers to hawking Dr. Who t-shirts and other paraphernalia at the recent Dr. Who Festival at the Hyatt that attracted about a thousand people.

Whovians are not just a small fringe group. An estimated 110 million fans in sixty countries follow the Doctor's adventures. The Doctor Who Fan Club of America claims 50,000 members, and...
According to the club's founder, Ron Katz, membership is increasing by about 400 people per month. Dr. Who appears weekly on 166 stations in the United States, and WCET reports that locally the show has maintained a consistently strong audience. According to Nielsen ratings, 9,000 households (about 23,000 individuals) were tuned in last February — not bad for a show that defies the usual “sex and violence” formula.

Dr. Who is very different from the top American science fiction series, Star Trek. And in many ways, these differences say a lot about both British and American cultures.

With the exception of Mr. Spock, almost all the crew in Star Trek come from Earth, perhaps reflecting the typically American “we're number one” mentality. The crew charges through the universe on a huge star ship, the Enterprise (reiterating the American philosophy that with a little Enterprise you can go far?). The Enterprise is part of a fleet of military vessels, and its captain, Kirk, is a career military man. Just like regular army folk, he and all the other crew members wear uniforms. Technically, the mission of the Enterprise is non-military — “to seek out new life and new civilizations.” But when necessary, Kirk uses the force of his laser-like phasers and photon torpedoes. With women, however, his most deadly weapon is charm. The epitome of American male bravado, Kirk romances every good-looking woman he meets — alien or not.

Dr. Who couldn't be more different. For one thing, the Doctor isn't an earthling; he's a Time Lord from the planet Gallifrey. An independent maverick and runaway, he gallivants through space and time in — are you ready for this? A phone booth. Actually, it only looks like a British metropolitan police telephone box. It's really a TARDIS (Time and Relative Dimensions in Space). The TARDIS is no state-of-the-art space ship, and the Doctor is no captain. He's an eccentric scientist whose wardrobe is anything but uniform — from a huge fur coat, to a mismatched suit and twenty-foot scarf, to a dapper jacket with a celery stalk pinned to the lapel. The Doctor has no phasers or photon torpedoes; the closest thing he has to a weapon is a sonic screwdriver — sort of a futuristic Swiss army knife that comes in particularly handy for jimmying open locked doors.

With typically British reserve, the Doctor's relationships with his female companions are purely platonic and intellectual. He even handles the various
bug-eyed monsters he encounters with wonderfully British aplomb: an outstretched hand and a warm "How do you do? I'm the Doctor."

There are a few similarities between Star Trek and Dr. Who. Both Kirk and the Doctor are defenders of peace and self-determination for all beings. Both are morally bound not to interfere with the worlds they encounter. Both do anyway. And both must do battle with recurring villains — Kirk with the Klingons and Romulans, the Doctor with the Master, the Evil Guardian, and the Daleks (mean, overgrown versions of R2D2 who want, of course, to rule the universe).

Perhaps the most bizarre aspect of Dr. Who is its glaringly bad special effects. A generation raised on the realistic effects created by George Lucas and Steven Spielberg can't help being amused at the crazy critters that confront the Doctor. You want hokey-looking robots? You want guys running around in giant ant suits? Dr. Who has 'em. But oddly enough, the laughable props don't seem to matter. No one reads a book for the quality of paper it's printed on. Likewise, no one watches Dr. Who for the quality of the special effects. In both cases, the important part is the story. That, and the characters, are what mesmerize the viewers. And make Whovians out of ordinary people.

But just as it's difficult to tune into a soap opera for the first time and understand what's going on, it's also difficult to follow the Doctor at first. All the Doctor's co-travelers have their own unique personalities, their own distinct backgrounds and problems. And these
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characters come and go. Some go back home. Some find new lives in new times and places. Some even die. To make matters more confusing, even the Doctor himself is not always exactly the same. Since the show's inception in 1963, the Doctor has been portrayed by six different actors — William Hartnell, Patrick Troughton, Jon Pertwee, Tom Baker (the first Doctor seen by American audiences when the show premiered here in 1977), Peter Davison (who played Tristan in All Creatures Great and Small), and Colin Baker (Tom's brother). And each actor has brought new and different qualities to the role.

It also takes a little while to get used to the varying lengths of the program. Although the show is produced in half-hour segments in Britain, it's aired on WCET in “features” — basically the number of segments necessary to complete a given story line. Some are only about forty-five minutes long; others last up to three hours. When you sit down for a night with the Doctor, you're never quite sure how long you'll be there!

Dr. Who is an acquired taste, but it is habit-forming. “When you tune into [the show],” says Hill, “you can tune out all your problems, that's for sure. It's total fantasy.”

For WCET, though, it's been more than a fantasy; it's been a dream come true. “I think it has opened up a new audience for us,” says Hill. “Once they take a look at Dr. Who, they say, 'What else (does WCET) have to offer?' They become members, they receive our Options (the WCET program guide), and they see that there are a lot of other programs that they're interested in. It's helped total membership. Some of those people have probably never watched us before.”

WCET plans to reward the Whovians for their support. According to Hill, the station has signed a new three-year contract. “We have purchased the rights to air all the Doctors now.”

With the support the show has received here, the Doctor will undoubtedly continue to make house calls in Cincinnati for some time to come.

For more information about the local Dr. Who fan club, you can write to The
Friends of the Time Lord, 2634 St.
Albans Ave., Cincinnati, OH 45237.

For information about the national
fan club, you can write to the Dr. Who
Fan Club of America, P.O. Box 6024,
Denver, CO 80206.