

# REGENERATE!

Doctor Who and his Tardis have found new life in cyberspace and it's down to the fans, says **Mark Osterloh**



It's been a long time coming, but after an absence of nearly 10 years, broken only by the brief novelty of a not very good one-off TV movie in 1996, *Doctor Who* has finally returned to officially licensed production, though not in the form that perhaps some were expecting.

Last month everyone's favourite Time Lord re-materialised in selected outlets across the country, to embark upon the first of what the show's new producers hope will become a new series of original adventures, not on film or television this time — but on audio.

The new stories, which for the time being will feature only past Doctors — Paul McGann, the eighth and current incarnation, is yet to commit — are being produced under licence from the BBC by independent production company Big Finish. They will be released bi-monthly, on CD and cassette, and take full advantage of the spoken word format, using the very latest advances in digital audio production.

But why does *Doctor Who* inspire such interest and dedication and what is driving this constant demand for new material, particularly now in the audio format?

Stephen Coles, executive producer

for the BBC and the man given the responsibility of overseeing the new Big Finish releases, believes that "the people who care about the show miss being immersed in that universe — and in many ways audio is the best medium to bring it back. Your budget is a lot lower, your effects far more convincing, and your leading man can be pictured just as he was when he was saving the galaxy every Saturday teatime."

Howard Richardson, of Floor Ten Audio, another group dedicated to the production of *Doctor Who* audio plays, says: "I dare say there are people who would like to do their own *Sweeney* story, say, but there simply aren't enough devoted *Sweeney* fans out there for the stories ever to get listened to."

"There are many like myself who are quite devoted to the TV programme and who combine efforts via the Internet to ensure that the programme lives on."

"For a while there was a sense of 'Damn the BBC — we'll just do it for ourselves instead.' It's almost like *Doctor Who* passed into the public domain once the BBC disowned it."

"I can say for sure that had *Doctor Who* still been on our TV sets, I would not have felt any need to put out original stories for the Internet community, so in a sense we're trying to replace what we lost when it came off the air."

Bill Baggs, founder of BBV, a video and audio production company already well known for its *Doctor Who*-inspired releases, which have so far featured the return of robot dog K9 and a host of familiar monsters — Sontarans and Zygons to name but two — is one such person.

He has worked with many fans over the years who, like himself, are largely self-taught: "There's lots of new computer software out there and the fans who are technically aware have performed very well."

"I've advertised in the past and got responses from so-called industry professionals who haven't got a clue. Non-fans don't always have a grip on what we're trying to do — we're not making *The Archers*."

This, then, is perhaps the most significant and positive development in the production of new *Doctor Who*: the growing number of professional enthusiasts working in TV, radio and publishing — the so-called "pro-fans".

In fact, BBV and Big Finish are two excellent examples of production companies run or staffed by individuals who, in recent years, have successfully crossed over from amateur to professional production.

Although Big Finish is the first official revival for some time, using original actors, sound effects and concepts from the programme, in one sense the show has never really been away. A steady stream of new material, both licensed and unlicensed, has been available to hungry fans since the series' cancellation in 1989 after 26 years.

But at the more serious end of the spectrum, advances in audio/visual production technology and the expansion of the Net in the past five or six years have meant that a significant number of fans have taken control of the means of production.

The quality and volume of official — and not so official — product has thus increased dramatically. "It really is cheaper to produce audio and visual drama now because of modern technology," confirms Big Finish producer Jason Haigh-Ellery, speaking from within the official camp.

Richardson of Floor Ten Audio agrees: "All the effects can be done with computers nowadays, so there's no need for racks full of obscure processing units. Our Daleks, for instance, were just recorded with us doing a silly voice and then using the computer to apply the ring-modulation effect over the top. It cost nothing, and yet sounds identical to the original voices."

Striking a less commercial note, but one no less relevant, the Internet and email have kept *Doctor Who* alive by broadening and strengthening the ties that hold fandom together. So it's really not surprising that the Doctor and his Tardis have found a new lease of life in cyberspace.

Doctor Who: The Sirens of Time  
by Nick Briggs  
Big Finish Productions  
£13.99

Even the most casual of *Doctor Who* fans will be relieved to hear that *The Sirens of Time* is the real McCoy... or Baker... or Davison.

From the first digitally enhanced second, author Nicholas Briggs sweeps the listener up in an epic and atmospheric story that rarely disappoints.

While drawing significantly upon established *Who* mythology, Briggs is careful not to alienate those listeners who may yet think Gallifrey is a small Welsh village, or that Dimensional Transcendentalism is a kind of yogic meditation technique.

After a tense but dramatic prologue, in which we learn that the Time Lord's home planet is under siege, the seventh Doctor (Sylvester McCoy) opens the door of the Tardis and steps into the inhospitable swamps of a jungle planet.

In part two, the fifth Doctor (Peter Davison) finds himself trapped aboard a German U-Boat during the First World War. And it's third time unlucky for the sixth Doctor (Colin Baker) in the far future, as he falls foul of a mysterious galactic cloud called the Kurgon Wonder and its terrible and powerful occupant.

What becomes clear by the fourth episode is that each Doctor has been manipulated to change the course of events by the same unseen force.

It is only when all three incarnations come together to discuss the problem that they realise the unwitting part each has played in the rewriting of established history. Who — or what — is responsible? And to what end?

The strong script, characterisation and wonderfully familiar BBC sound effects are made all the more pleasurable by the added bickering of the various Doctors, particularly McCoy and Baker's "Watch it fatty — watch it shorty" routines. And their combined response to the revealed threat is the highlight of the story.

## Who what where and when

● *Dr Who* was the longest-running science fiction series in the history of television. The first series was shown in 1963; the 158th and final BBC-produced series, *Survival*, was aired in December 1989.

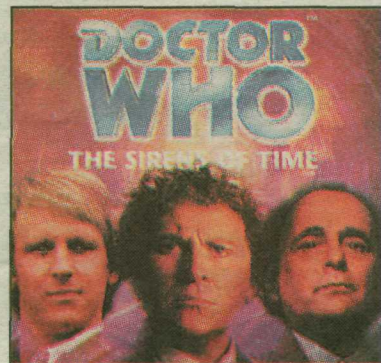
● The Daleks were the most feared of *Dr Who*'s many enemies. There were supposed to be six, but at £120 each, the BBC special effects budget could only stretch to four, and lots of cardboard copies.

● *Dr Who*'s *Who*: among those that braved the wobbly sets and man-in-suit monsters were Tim Piggot-Smith, Geoffrey Palmer, Peter Barkworth, Brian Blessed, Brian Cant, John

Cleese, Martin Clunes, Windsor Davies, Brian Glover, Shelia Hancock, Martin Jarvis and Kate O'Mara.

● The closest any of the Doctor's irritating screaming assistants ever came to being a sex object was the leather-bikini-clad Leela, played by Louise Jameson. She is now to be found disguised as Rosa Di Marco, running Giuseppe's, the Italian cafe in Albert Square.

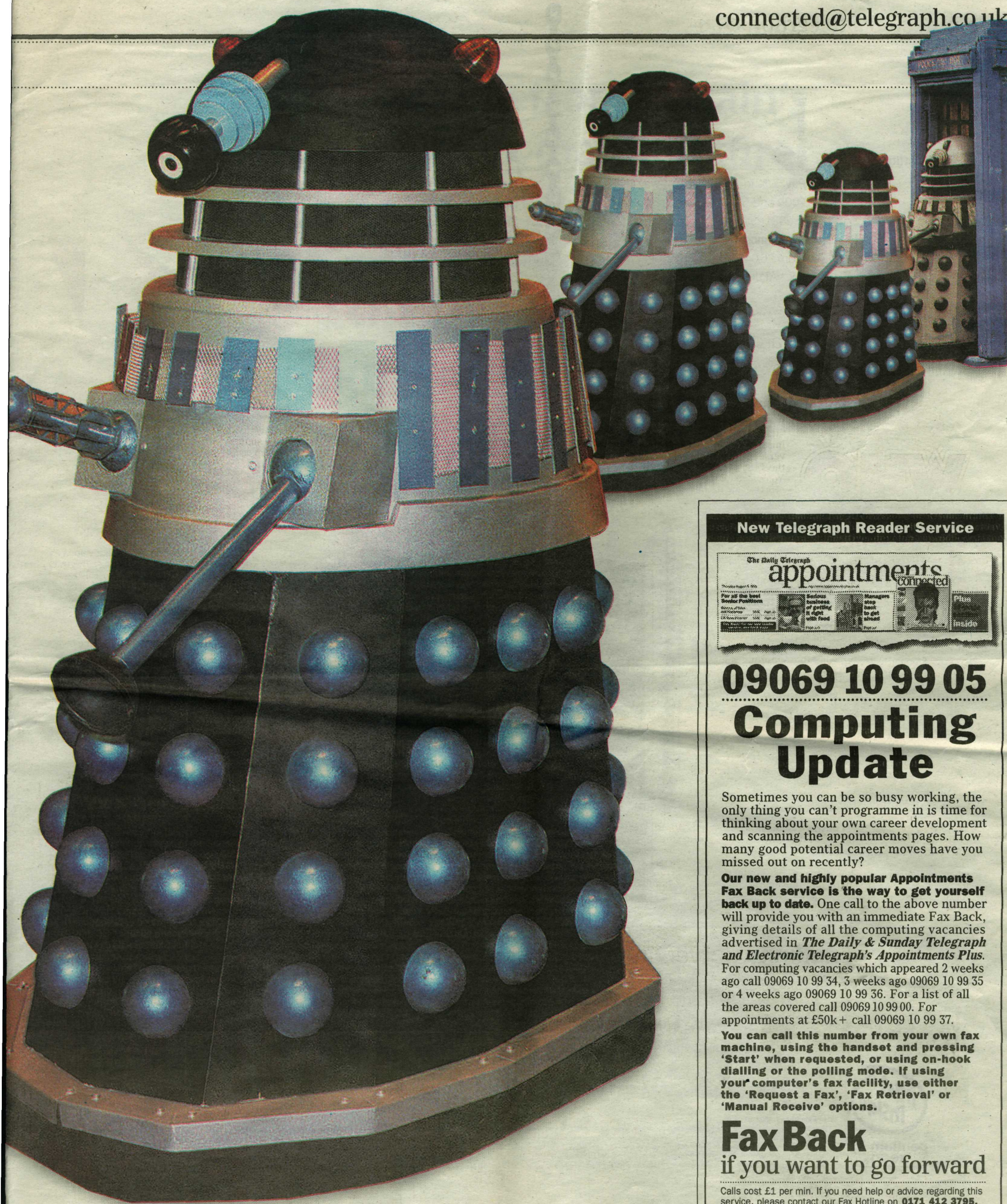
● Jo Grant, another screaming assistant from the Seventies, played by Katy Manning, shocked fans by appearing in nothing more than a pair of thigh-length boots in the first issue of a magazine called *Girl*.



Times past: Peter Cushing in the 1965 film *Daleks Invasion Earth 2150 AD*; the Dalek leader Davros; and Jon Pertwee, the dandy Doctor

Revived: Davison, Baker, McCoy





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