

Monday Morning Magazine

The Magazine YOU can Listen TO

June 14, 2004. Issue 7

Steve Walker's
21st Century Blues



June 14, 10 a.m. (ET)
on BCR 1090 AM
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21st CENTURY BLUES

The story of the century to come, through an account of the life and times of the Chaffinch family as recounted by Chaff Chaffinch the famous stylite and sometime Archbishop of Canterbury and leader of the Revolution of '24, given while up a pole in Ethiopia in 2099.

EPISODE ONE: THE GOLFING CHAFFINCH

'The three greatest evils we face in the world today are disease, despair and golf...and the greatest of these is golf.

2032. The European Federal Government has made golf illegal. People get their fun playing the murderously macho game of Pnong and watching the Everyone Channel which allows everyone to watch everyone else in the world 24/7. But some people just can't give up on golf, and onesuch is Chaff's cousin Seve Chaffinch. He finds happiness on Golf Island, a secret sanctuary for like-minded souls, but is betrayed to the authorities by his girlfriend Scampi, a fervent pningista. On trial for his life he denies everything, but the prosecution create a clone to testify against him – clones have all of their original's memories, but cannot lie, and so Seve is condemned. But before the clone is melted down Seve manages to change places with it and escape...

EPISODE TWO: THE EXPLODING MRS. CHAFFINCH

"When we have educated our people to look at pianos instead of playing them, in other words to think music rather than hearing it, then we shall apply ourselves to removing the tweet from birds..."

"When we have educated our people to look at pianos instead of playing them, in other words to think music rather than hearing it, then we shall apply ourselves to removing the tweet from birds..."

2043. Despotism has made a comeback and replaced democracy as the favourite mode of government. The Noise Abatement Society has been transformed from a peaceful pressure group for quiet into the most powerful political organization on the planet, with a police force to match. Italians are always in trouble with this, and to control their exuberant noise-making the entire population of Italy have been fitted with devices which cause them to explode should they make a sound louder than a certain decibel level. When Chaff's rebellious baby brother Cod Chaffinch falls in love with the beautiful Merluzza, it can only end in tragedy.

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The people behind 21st CENTURY BLUES



Donald Pleasence (Chaff) was one of Britain's finest star character actors and leading players. He started acting in 1939, on the London stage in 1939. He served in the RAF, was shot down and held in a POW camp. His balding, bland face and memorable voice made him the most popular actor on British TV. His outstanding performance in a BBC adaptation of Trollope's *Barchester* novels was perhaps his best, and transformed it from a costume drama into something truly compelling, raising the game of everyone involved. He played some great roles in movies, including *Sons and Lovers* and *Cul-de-sac* an adaptation of Singer's *The Joke*, and is well remembered as the Forger in *The Great Escape*. He played Satan in *The Greatest Story Ever Told*. Latterly he specialized in strange or menacing characters from Ernst Blofeld in *You Only Live Twice* to Dr. Loomis in the *Halloween* series. *21st Century Blues* gave him a very welcome opportunity to return to comedy and character, and he embraced it with huge enthusiasm. Sadly he died shortly after the plays were recorded.



Rachel Atkins (Scampi). Appeared frequently in BBC Radio 4 plays, and has voiced videogames such as *Broken Sword*. Most recently she played a leading role in the BBC TV movie *Pompeii, The Last Day*.



Shaun Scott (Seve). Born 1954 in Canada. He was a regular on two of Britain's most popular long-running TV series, *The Bill* and *Dream Team*. Has appeared in numerous British films including *'Wild West'* and *The Lady's Not For Burning* and notably in TV adaptations of *The Browning Version* and *The Merchant of Venice*.



Sean Scanlan (Birdie). Veteran actor who has starred in numerous very popular TV shows and min-series including *Two Thousand Acres of Sky*, *The Tales of Para Handy* and *The Beiderbecke Affair*. Most recently he appeared in the Miramax comedy *My Life So Far*.

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David Jarvis (Cod) worked as a matte artist, notably on Disney's *Tarzan*, as well as acting. He starred in a sketch show for children on BBC1 called *Mick and Mac* and appeared in Jack Rosenthal's romantic adventure film *Captain Jack*; he voiced the character Asuma Shinohara in the two Patlabor anime films.

Malcolm Ward (Bass) is a British TV and radio actor who appeared in the BBC series *Target*.

Oona Beeson (Merluzza) is a British TV and radio actress who appeared most recently in the BBC TV movie *The Scold's Bridle*.



Eoin O'Callaghan (director). Born in Northern Ireland. Actor in TV movies 'Echoes' and 'Undertow of the Armada'. He moved from BBC Belfast to London in the early 1990s and directed many radio plays for BBC Radio Drama, including ten of Steve Walker's. Most recently he was the producer on a British movie with Julie Walters called 'Before You Go' (2002) in which he also acted.



Steve Walker (writer). Of Scots-Irish extraction, he was born in 1956 in Gateshead in the industrial North of England, where he lived and worked until he was 25. Made his stage debut at the age of 4, singing 'Mack the Knife' from *The Threepenny Opera*. First one-man show as an artist was held in Newcastle's Joicey Museum in 1977. In 1984 moved to London, and in the following decade wrote 100 plays for television and radio, including 4 TV and 3 radio series. His 39-part animated TV show for BBC/WDR, *Noah's Island*, the story of an ecologically minded polar bear's attempts to create a perfect world was regularly watched by 40 million children across Europe and is still being watched in countless reruns today.

He has written more than 40 radio plays, mostly for BBC as well as Irish and German radio. His plays are also produced in Hungary, Germany, South Africa, Australia, the U.S. and Canada, and are studied on the curriculum of schools and universities in the U.S. and Australia. The only writer ever to win the Giles Cooper Award for best radio play two years in succession, and is dedicated to radio as 'a medium perhaps better placed for the communication of raw and subtle emotions than any other'.

His novels include the epic *21st Century Blues* and *22nd Century Blues*, which grew out of the radio series, are a detailed history of the future of mankind. Written in 1993-4, they contain spookily accurate predictions of current events, including the career of Osama bin Laden culminating in his eventual assassination and defeat.

As an artist he has held 64 one-man shows of paintings, prints and drawings. His website www.swalks.com contains the texts of his radio plays, extracts from his novels, stories, poems, selections of his *Total Government* cartoons, and hundreds of his pictures. A frequent visitor to, and student of the U.S. and Canada, he lives on top of a mountain in South-West France.

www.swalks.com

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The Steve Walker Fact File

Three biggest influences in your life, living or dead.

- 1) The biggest influence in my life now is the decay of culture, which comprises the emptying of thought and the abolition of the unique voice. These obstacles and powers were not so influential early in my career; now it is much harder to get the same things said and made as were made then; for new things, new ideas, I've had to look to new areas and, in some cases, invent them.
- 2) Mountains. I live in the Pyrenees and sometimes in the Alps; otherwise I'm on my way to the Rockies. There was a Japanese poet, Kamo-no-Chomei, who lived in the mountains who moved gradually higher and higher and into a smaller and smaller house: this seems to me a perfect antidote to the failures of capitalism.
- 3) The artist whose example most influences my thinking is Picasso. Not because of his protean greatness but because of his failings, problems and absences, which are both encouraging and enlightening. When Picasso was painting his stupendous 'Las Meninas' sequence, he walked up the stairs to his studio every morning in dread of the challenge. Contemplation of this allows a lightness of touch to more easily follow my own dread.

Three things you can't live without.

- 1) Swimming in Alpine Lakes.
- 2) Drawing every day.
- 3) The prospect of radical change.

Three other languages you wish you could speak

- 1) Bengali – I speak some but would like to be fluent, and to read Tagore in the original.
- 2) Greek – I can read Greek but wish I could think in it. To understand all the different kinds of Greek Cavafy uses in his poems.
- 3) Irish – I am Irish by background and whenever I'm learning a language I find Irish words often coming to mind; I would like to focus on it and learn it properly.

If you had a choice, which decade would you pick to live during?

1900-1910, the beginning of the Modern movement. I would have been more at home there. I could have done things there.

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What's the strongest aspect of your writing?

The Mouse People demand similarity.
I failed the interview,
said something outrageous
without knowing.

In the hills with Renegades
it is no better.
I can't see how they failed to get in.

This poem illustrates how I am flattering nobody and potentially offending everyone, because readers usually identify with the Mouse People or the Renegades and not with the 'I' of the poem.

Who is your first audience after you've written/created your first draft of anything?

I don't believe in this idea of a first draft – a poem or a play kind of already exists, it's just a question of hearing it properly. My wife of 30 years is the first to read completed works, then producers, editors etc.

What's the biggest mistake new writers of radio make?

The biggest mistake is not to realize that radio is the most visual of all media. I started writing radio because I was a painter. Radio is difficult, because you must be thoroughly immersed in its concepts and possibilities, and not be thinking of theatre or movies. Also it is different every time, for each play that you write – there are no rules, but the commercial pressures have the same distorting effect they have everywhere. A radio play is not one thing but many: a meeting of ideas.

Favorites:

Book(s)

Books are too important to me to really pick favorites, and I find it hard to define myself by what other people have written. But...

'We' by Yevgeny Zamyatin

'After London' by Richard Jefferies

'Labyrinths' by Jorge Luis Borges

'The Other Side' by Alfred Kubin

'Lost Illusions' by Honoré de Balzac

'The Differend' by Jean François Lyotard

'The Guinea Pigs' by Ludvík Vaculík

'The Magician of Lublin' by Isaac Bashevis Singer

'The Deerslayer' by James Fenimore Cooper

'Our Ancestors' by Italo Calvino

Collected Poems of César Vallejo

Collected Poems of C. P. Cavafy

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Film(s)

It's a Gift
Duck Soup
La Strada
Treasure of the Sierra Madre
City Lights
You Can't Take It With You

Record(s)

'Octopus's Garden' by The Beatles

Play(s)

'Galileo' by Bertolt Brecht
'The Master Builder' by Henrik Ibsen
'Man and Superman' by George Bernard Shaw
'The Seagull' by Anton Chekhov

Personality

One of the Buddha's original followers, called Vacchagotta, was continually asking the Buddha questions, all of which the Buddha answered with complete silence. He was a man who persistently asked questions to which there were no answers.

Best you've ever received from someone/somewhere:

Advice

I've never received any good advice from anybody. My experience has been rather that people attempt to control what I am setting out to say. From childhood on I have always been advised to 'compromise'; I never have.

Writing tip

Scott Fitzgerald's 'The Crack-Up' is very useful, especially when you're cracking up. The most difficult thing for a writer is to sustain, through the years, and to fight new battles and re-invent – hardly any writers do this.

Voice-over tip

Norman Jones told me that when acting I should always be myself, but although I have acted in many of my plays I usually end up playing deities, which has made this difficult advice to follow!

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Gift

A copy of Bewick's 'A General History of Quadrupeds' (1811) from my wife for my forty-fifth birthday.

Life lesson

Once on a train from Patros to Athens a hundred-year-old man pointed out the Corinth Canal while I was looking out of the wrong window. Lesson: Always be looking in the right direction. Looking is what a writer does.

Best you've ever given to someone/somewhere:

Advice

Never listen to any advice.

Gift

When I left my old house and studio in the gritty streets of Gateshead, I gave everything away. I still remember an Irish tinker girl walking down a filthy back street carrying a Chinese lacquer parasol. There was a lightness in her step.

Writing tip

In a piece of writing, nobody ever knows more than the writer does – it is truly the only perspective that matters.

Voice-over tip

When playing an Icelandic character, convince the people in Reykjavik not the people in Peoria.

Life lesson

You don't always have to be who you are. (See my radio play Holus-Bolus). You can start anew any time you like, and again five minutes later. Our identities are not who we are, only what we are.

If you were given a choice to choose a perfect face and a perfect voice who would it look/sound like?

There is no perfection of this kind in actuality or desirability. Perfection implies the ontological existence of Anselm's God, so a perfect face and voice would have to be God's. But there is no God – if there was one she would have the face of Garbo and the voice of Edward G. Robinson.

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If you were not doing creative work for different mediums, what would you have been doing?

I would like to have been Queen of England, so that I could abdicate and declare a republic. I like republics. Or maybe a giraffe. Not an actual giraffe, I would just pretend to be a giraffe and so convince other giraffes that eventually they would take the proper place in the world which their manifest destiny designed for them – see, I've started already.

If you were to be recognized by a single sound, what would it be?

The sound of an exultant raven pushing a bear off a mountain, or an exultant bear jumping off a mountain holding a raven in each hand and never reaching the ground.

Which color gives you strength?

In 1863 Cézanne answered 'Natural harmony' to this question. But I don't think there's necessarily anything natural about harmony, or anything harmonious about harmony; I prefer to think of a color I haven't seen yet.

A great piece of creation you wished you were the creator of

I would like to have created the little grinning racehorses inside Michelangelo's 'David', which no one will find until the end of the world – and then the race can begin.

Re-arrange the letters of your name to form a different word(s) or name.

Walter Veeks. I've used Walter Veeks to fool and confuse people on many occasions – he never fails. As I always book restaurants in the name of Walter Veeks I haven't actually eaten a meal in a restaurant myself in 30 years – this is an excellent dieting tip, by the way.

Richard Pryor or Lenny Bruce?

I am a huge admirer of both, but Richard Pryor makes me laugh more.

Charlie Chaplin or Buster Keaton?

For me this is an almost impossible question, as I am very close to both. In some ways it's harder than asking 'who's your favorite Marx Brother?' because this changes according to time of life and mood. In an election between the two, there would be no hanging chads – Chaplin would win by a moustache.

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Describe yourself with one word.

Mongoose.

An inanimate object that best represents you.

Grant's tomb.

A sound that best represents you.

The battle of Waterloo heard by an octopus inside a bottle 12 miles North by Northwest of Kerguelen Island and knowing exactly what it means. Which leads to a necessary second sound: an octopus's harrumph.

Egg white first or egg yolk first?

First you must break the egg. And before that, find the chicken. And before that, hide the chicken from the fox... except if you are a fox.

Favorite season.

Summer of 1326, I was happy then – no automobiles.

On a scale of 1-10, what stage are you in your career?

Although I've written over 100 plays and done millions of drawings, I would say that I am in a state of constant beginnings.

What catchphrase would you like to become popular? Invent one, if you like.

I don't believe in catchphrases. I prefer thought.

Shabbir 'Emon' Hassan

Next week on our program: **Steve Walker's**
Haunted By More Cake
In the newsletter: **A conversation with the author**

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Newsletter Publisher: Shabbir 'Emon' Hassan

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