

LICKS

#14

(August 1995) is written and produced by Rob Hansen of 144 Plasket Grove, East Ham, London E6 1AB, UK, for the 232nd FAPA mailing. © Rob Hansen, 1995.
e-mail: avedon@cix.compulink.co.uk

Thanks to the convention I'm currently working on, I don't have time to do anything specially for FAPA, so here's one from the files. It's an account of my first ever con, as written 20 years later and presented here for the first time in print:

FIRST CONTACT

It was 28 March 1975, Good Friday; the Vietnam War was rushing to an end, Harold Wilson was Prime Minister, and Margaret Thatcher had just been elected leader of the opposition Conservative party. No-one expected her to amount to anything. It was an era of long hair and flared trousers, of glam rock and Kung Fu films. It was a time so long ago that most people thought Meryl Streep was a throat infection, and so far, far away that Britain's hottest pop group was the Bay City Rollers.

The Bay City Rollers, who as their name suggests were a Scottish band, were at the top of the pop music chart having ousted Telly Savalas. No, seriously. Their number one hit single, 'Bye Bye Baby', was the latest in a series of vacuously bouncy songs that had spawned a fanatical following of screaming, tartan-clad girls and led to ludicrous comparisons with The Beatles. The lyrics of 'Bye Bye Baby' were unforgettable, sticking in the memory with the tenacity of superglue:

Bye bye baby, baby bye bye,
Bye bye baby bye bye bye,
Bye bye baby, don't make me cry,
Bye baby, baby bye bye.
(repeat ad nauseam)

How anyone of my generation can have the nerve to sneer at today's pop music I'll never know. Thank God punk was waiting in the wings!

Still, the unimaginable horrors of the Vietnam War and the Bay City Rollers were far from my mind on that Good Friday as I packed for a weekend at SEACON '75, the annual Eastercon, Britain's national science fiction convention and my first ever. I was a beardless youth of 20, clean-limbed and eagle-eyed (it would be another year before I started wearing glasses), a virgin and, so far as I knew, the only SF fan in Cardiff, Wales.

I set off for Coventry armed with a change of clothes, youthful enthusiasm, and great hopes. In my wallet was a packet of condoms (3), because you never knew. ^SI^S certainly didn't, anyway. I should've taken a box of Kleenex instead. The condoms stayed in my wallet until they eventually expired. I gave them a decent Christian burial. Naturally, I was careful to take along a number of my SF short stories with me, just in case I got to meet any magazine editors at SEACON. One of them was a deeply original tale about the last two survivors of a spaceship that crashes on a paradise planet, and not 'til the end of the story do you learn that their names are Adam and Eve. What discerning editor could've resisted such ground-breaking stuff? Wealth and fame as an SF author lay just around the corner. It still does.

The De Vere hotel was a shocking place. Literally. A modernish hotel with well-appointed rooms, the De Vere had the worst static electricity problem I've ever encountered. Walking just a few feet along its carpeted corridors built up enough charge to cause an audible 'CRACK' as you discharged it on the next metal surface or person you touched. The brass handrails on the stairs were a particular favourite. 'Bye, Bye, Baby' may have been at number one, but heard far more often in the De Vere that weekend was the catchy: 'CRACK'. "Arrgh, shit!"

As a first-timer who knew no-one else at the con I had taken the committee's advice and allowed them to set me up sharing a room with another first-timer so there would be at least one person there I could talk with. He was Welsh, wore glasses, and had thinning hair and an acne-scarred face. He was also elderly - he had to be all of 30 - and smoked smelly French cigarettes. Try as I might I can't recall his name, but he was pleasant enough and we got on all right. I only ever saw him again at one other con after this. I wonder what happened to him?

Dumping my luggage in the room, I dashed downstairs ('CRACK'. "Arrgh, shit!"), picked up my registration pack, and settled myself into a chair to read it all straight through. As I read I peered over the top of my programme book at the hustle and bustle of the convention, and at the large number of people who greeted each other enthusiastically, laughed and joked together, and who were clearly well-acquainted. I envied them their obvious sense of community without in any way feeling deliberately excluded from it. This would not be true of a later generation.

In 1975 many wondered where all the Hippies had gone, a question answered for me the instant I entered the convention hall and saw the audience. This was where I would spend most of the weekend, religiously attending all the programme items and hanging on every word uttered from the stage even, God help me, those of Gerry Webb on 'The Feasibility of Interstellar Communication' when what I really needed was information on the feasibility of interpersonal communication with others at SEACON. Pausing only for snacks and toilet breaks, I sat through hours of films, panels, and the puzzling ritual whereby various celebrities were announced from the stage by Peter Nicholls, even though most were in the bar. None of this was made any more intelligible by the underpowered microphones, which were to cause problems all weekend. Eventually, I made my own way to the bar and soaked up the atmosphere myself for a few hours, having a drink with my roommate before crashing out.

As an impoverished trainee draughtsman my finances were tight so I was up bright and early on Saturday to make sure I didn't miss the breakfast included in the cost of the room. Then it was straight into the con hall and a showing of Stephen Spielberg's 'Duel', a very impressive debut feature from the director of the year's most successful film, 'Jaws'. This was followed by a Tom Shippey talk and then by lunch which I ate at the Wimpey near the hotel, as I would all my non-breakfast meals. This was in the days before the Wimpey chain decided to become an imitation of McDonald's, and they still served their wonderfully odd selection of meals, most of which included something called a 'bender' (which, in anticipation of the puzzlement this will cause younger and foreign fans, I won't explain). These are now as one with Tyre and Ninevah, but I can't be the only fan of my generation who still remembers them with a sneaking affection.

Back at the De Vere, I found myself sharing a lift with the godlike figure of the convention chairman. I couldn't restrain myself.

"Great convention!" I enthused, drawing on my vast experience in such matters.

"Mmmm," he agreed, looking at me warily.

"I'm really enjoying myself!" I added, desperate to impress and grinning inanely.

"Mmmm," he said, beginning to look alarmed. I was about to add to my incisive critical analysis of SEACON but the doors opened and, with a quick nod, he fled.

And that was how I first met Malcolm Edwards.

After Harry Harrison had barked and growled his way through his Guest of Honour speech (I'd originally signed up for SEACON because Michael Moorcock was GoH, MM then being my favourite author, but he dropped out), I made my way to the bookroom where he and Christopher Priest were signing copies of their books, and bought one by each to be suitably inscribed. This was exciting stuff to me then. Real science fiction writers had signed copies of their books for me! Goshwowboyoboy!!

Not being by nature a particularly shy person, I frequently fell into conversation with other people during the course of the convention, including another first-timer I got chatting to in the book room that afternoon when both of us were browsing. This meeting would be the most significant part of SEACON for me, and an electrifying experience. When we introduced ourselves and shook hands for the first time it was as if a current passed between us. In fact, one did. 'CRACK'. "Arrgh, shit!" we cried in unison.

His name was Paul Kincaid, and he was a postgraduate majoring in Sexual Frustration at nearby Warwick University. Everyone else had gone home for the holiday but Paul had decided to stay on at his campus flat over Easter and commute to the con. (Anything was better than staying there listening to the radio playing 'Bye, Bye, Baby' over and over.) Paul had glasses, a slight speech impediment ("the late show" came out as "fellate show"), straight black hair, and a sharp, spiky beard that gave him the appearance of someone engaged in oral sex with a hedgehog. We hit it off immediately, and went to most of the day's remaining programme items together.

The final event of the day, at 10.15pm, was the Fancy Dress Parade. Back then this wasn't the slick masquerade dominated by dedicated costumers it's since become but more of an excuse for a bit of fun. Some entrants portrayed characters from novels (such as the blue-skinned guy who, despite obvious efforts to wash the stuff off, remained blue for the rest of the con - that'll teach him to use emulsion), but more numerous and enjoyable were the jokers. Those I remember the master of ceremonies introducing were the guy who painted his face red and his nose yellow ("A boil." - MC), and the person in a loose rubber suit that covered them completely ("Introducing the De Vere's proposed solution to the static problem." - MC). Also (and this one seems so unlikely that it may well be an example of False Memory Syndrome on my part), con chairman Malcolm Edwards, who appeared wearing short trousers and pulling a fake toilet along on a piece of string ("A boy and his bog!" - MC). Hilarious stuff! What a shame people take fancy dress so seriously these days.

I was up early again the next morning in order not to miss breakfast, which I ate alone. There wasn't too much going on when I'd finished and wandered into the convention areas so, Paul having been detained at his university lodgings by an urgent appointment with a box of Kleenex, I decided to take in the film. Now, over the years I've suspended disbelief enough to be able to enjoy movies featuring giant ants, giant spiders, giant apes, and the like, but there was no way I was going to feel at all spooked by the monsters this film, 'Night of the Lepus', had to offer. I'm sorry, but giant bunny rabbits just aren't menacing.

In the wake of this angora atrocity, and while waiting for Paul to show up, my wanderings took me upstairs ('CRACK'. "Arrgh, shit!") to the fandom room where a variety of fanzines were on sale. I sniffed dismissively at tatty mimeographed items with names like WRINKLED SHREW, EGG, and CHECKPOINT and decided to invest 25p in an obviously superior lithographed production put out by members of the Oxford University Science Fiction Group and featuring fiction by people with names like Langford and Smith. And this is why the first fanzine I ever owned a copy of was SFINX. Ah, missed opportunities!

Later that morning, Paul and I voted for next year's Eastercon to be held in Manchester. We made our decision after much agonising and careful weighing up of alternatives and ultimately based it on two things: 1) Manchester was Paul's home town, and 2) there was no other bid.

The best item of the afternoon session was 'Time Travellers Among Us', one of Bob Shaw's celebrated Serious Scientific Talks. This was a delight, with Bob delivering his 'thesis' with an expressionless deadpan that could have put many a professional comedian to shame, its internal logic rendering the jokes even more hilarious. The audience loved it, most getting into the spirit of the thing in the Q and A session afterwards where Bob demonstrated just how fast he can think on his feet.

"Mr Shaw," asked one questioner, "does drinking aid time travel?"

"Yes," he replied, "if you drink a bottle of Scotch, the next thing you know it's the following morning."

That evening, not being able to afford the banquet, Paul and I ate at Wimpey's before returning to the hotel and settling into the deep, comfortable armchairs in the first floor bar. We took this opportunity to read stories the other had written, and as I read his I couldn't resist glancing over frequently in an effort to see if he was enjoying my tales.

"So what did you think?" I asked when he finished reading.

"This is great stuff!" he lied. I think he'd just read the Adam and Eve story.

When the banquet had finished, we and the other paupers were allowed into the Fairfax Suite for the awards and presentations ceremony. Toastmaster Peter Weston, whose name I recognised from his articles in SCIENCE FICTION MONTHLY (which I read from cover-to-cover every month), thanked the committee and the Guest of Honour, Harry Harrison; the committee thanked Peter Weston, Harry Harrison, and each other; then Harrison concluded by barking and growling his thanks to Peter Weston, the individual committee members, other guests, hotel catering staff, his parents, his chair, the table, his drink, his knife and fork....

The final event of the evening was the dance, and oh the women, the women - where the hell were the women?! Men outnumbered women at SEACON by five to one (I counted the registrations in the programme book) and those that were there all seemed to be with boyfriends or husbands. As it happens I enjoy dancing enough that I'm prepared to dance alone if I have to, so I did. Music for the dance was provided by the Burlington's, a band led by committee member Graham Charnock who surveyed his audience with the cool disdain of one who has edited an issue of NEW WORLDS and who knows he'll shortly be appearing on a record album with Michael Moorcock. This would be deleted with indecent swiftness. Seeing that he was taking requests I asked for 'Bye Bye Baby'. Charnock recoiled in horror which, him being so cool, translated as raised eyebrows.

And that was more or less it. The night wore on and I wore out, but I can't say as I found out what it was all about. Still, as I left for home the next morning, the hotel having bid me farewell in its own special way ('CRACK'. "Arrgh, shit!"), I was filled the wondrousness of what I'd just experienced (nothing quite compares with your first con) and suffused with love for my fellow man. Just how suffused I was you'll appreciate when I tell you that I even managed to smile tolerantly when the guy sitting next to me on the train back to Cardiff turned his radio on. Even 'Bye, Bye, Baby' couldn't spoil my mood.