

Wiffle Level To Full

Bob Fischer

“No questions. Except one... Smeg Or No Smeg?”

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So this is it. My final convention. It's been nearly three weeks since Doune Castle, exactly ten days since Paul found my missing mobile phone down the back of his settee, and exactly eleven days since I'd gone out and bought a new one, thus providing the *Robin Of Sherwood* dolls with one final swipe of dark retribution. My (physical and mobile phone) batteries are recharged, I'm really looking forward to this weekend, and I can't help feeling a twinge of sadness that the whole jolly escapade is coming to an end.

Because, despite the odd moment of anxiety, irritation and sheer, back-breaking exhaustion, I've had a blast. Some events I've enjoyed more than others, but every single one – and I'm filling up as I write this, and not just with Kit-Kats and Flamin' Hot Monster Munch – has made me fall back in love with my favourite childhood and teenage things. I've been like a deep sea diver in the filthy ocean of consciousness, dredging up long-forgotten memories from the silt and bringing them to the surface to restore them with a much-needed polish.

All of this wells to the forefront of my mind as we tramp through torrential rain to the Peterborough Holiday Inn reception, and decamp to an entirely beige bedroom. I flop onto the duvet and run through an existential audit sheet in my mind. My finances are - to be frank - completely smegged. The price of tickets to my various conventions and fan events has varied wildly... *Star Trek* was a fiver, *Star*

Wars was £9, *Monty Python* £10 and *The Prisoner* £16. For *Doctor Who* and *Blake's 7* I bought the two together at a bargain £100. *Discworld* was £45, *Red Dwarf* was £60 and *Robin Of Sherwood* £80. But one thing that hasn't varied much is the endless cost of traipsing up and down the country in the Starlet, combined with hotel fees – my bill at *Discworld* was £175, and at Red Dwarf we're looking at around £150. Chuck in hot meals, copious amounts of alcohol and expensive items of merchandise subsequently bought in a foolish, drunken haze at charity auctions, and the sum keeps mounting. And don't forget that the average price of a packet of Flamin' Hot Monster Munch has risen from 45p to 47p in the eleven months since November 2005.

On the plus side, I'm getting on really well with Sorcha. And I've noticed something really striking – we don't argue as much when we're at sci-fi conventions together. Or, if we do, it's about whether the Liberator in *Blake's 7* should have a serial number rather than a name.

I'm not entirely sure why this should be, or where it should take our relationship. Perhaps it's because none of the things we do actually quarrel about – the state of the garden, the bathroom floor tiling situation, why the dog hair hasn't been hoovered off the stairs – are remotely applicable in the strange, cloistered environment of the convention. And maybe the answer is to sell the house, put the dog into cold storage, and spend our lives swinging merrily around the world, from signing session to celebrity panel to water pistol fight, without ever stopping to allow real life to intrude. I've read that at any given point, somewhere in the world, a radio station will be playing The Beatles' 'Yesterday', and wonder if the same is true of sci-fi and cult TV conventions – if, given unlimited stamina and air miles, you could actually globetrot from one to the next, like a rock band on tour, but without the

associated air of debauched, sexual excess. Unless you count the *Blake's 7* weekends, obviously.

We wander down to the convention's main function room, where a couple of dozen tables are laid out, cabaret-style, with white tablecloths and assorted Red Dwarf paraphernalia, including fake Coke cans emblazoned with the Jupiter Mining Company logo and flyers for "Krytie TV Shower Night - Live" featuring "The Girls On D Wing As You've Never Seen Before". We're soon joined at the table by a clean-cut, twentysomething London couple in *Mighty Boosh* T-shirts, who introduce themselves as Mike and Katy, and tentatively swop life stories with Sorcha while I'm sent to the bar to buy drinks. When I return, Hattie Hayridge – the second Holly remember, the one who isn't bald and gloomy – is starting off the Friday Night Quiz. She's endearingly nervy and giggly, and admits to us all she knows nothing about *Red Dwarf*. And we're not much better – our table limps along to seventh place, propped up resolutely by the staggeringly detailed knowledge of two fresh-faced early teenagers from Hartlepool, who – when Red Dwarf's last series was hogging the TV screens – can barely have been downloaded from Adobe Babymaker 5.1. Or however it is they do it these days.

We're all pissed by the end, and I wonder if the summer's breakneck schedule has finally caught up with me when the room suddenly seems to suffer from an infestation of penguins... until Katy points out that the merchandise room has opened for business, and every third fan in the room has spent £10 on a scarily authentic copy of Mr Flibble, the fluffy penguin hand puppet that barks dastardly instructions to Rimmer after a hologramatic virus sends him round the twist. They're everywhere, and even the teenage Hartlepudlians on our table have purchased one apiece to peck at

each other's heads. "Mr Flibble's very cross!" they snipe at each other, in authentically nasal Chris Barrie imitations.

Behind them, I notice with a start, is Chris Barrie himself.

Which takes me surprise – after all, it's almost ten o'clock. But Chris – in a laudable demonstration of the affection in which the show's stars hold their ever-loyal fans – has raced from London to be here on the only possible break in his schedule, and is pelting back again straight afterwards to resume work. "I'm normally here on a Sunday when you're all incredibly hungover, this year I'm here on Friday when you're all incredibly pissed," he beams. He dives straight into a marathon, quickfire Q&A session, the results of are so entertaining they make me wonder if all such occasions should be conducted after 10pm.

Q: "If you were forced to go on a caravan holiday with either Gordon Brittas or Arnold Rimmer, which one would you choose?"

A: "Brittas, he'd keep the place tidy. Rimmer would try to kill me during the night"

Q: "Did you get your septic tank sorted out?"

A: "Yes, I now have a soakaway septic tank, and the summer has thankfully been a pong-free zone".

Q: "You and Jesus go out to dinner. Who pays?"

A: "Well I would offer, but if the Big J insists..."

Afterwards, we stampede into the merchandise room for autographs, and Sorcha drunkenly shakes Chris's hand as he signs her treasured DVD sleeves for posterity. Knowing his football allegiances, I apologise rather too smugly for Middlesbrough's staggering 2-1 victory over Chelsea a few weeks earlier.

“I don’t get many chances to gloat, so I seize them when they come around,” I smile.

“Don’t worry, you’ll get hammered tomorrow,” he grins back, before reassuring me that Gareth Southgate is the man for the job, and asking what I think the rest of the season holds. The two hundred fans in the queue behind me, eager to ask Chris to demonstrate the minute-long Space Corps salute that Rimmer designs in episode two of series eight, exude an air of tangible impatience.

Afterwards, I decide to pay tribute to Sorcha and our new-found sci-fi happiness by darting to the front of the room and taking part in the convention’s drunken karaoke singalong. I’ve flicked through the laminated song sheets at our table, and chosen a timeless pop classic whose concise dissection of the correlation between religious, sexual and emotional ecstasy has always struck me as a rare beacon of intelligence in an often facile commercial pop universe.

“Gawd ‘elp us, it’s got to be The King,” says the Karaoke Master, as I bumble to the rear of his PA system. “What is it, Suspicious Minds? Or Heartbreak Hotel?” He’s clocking my sideburns and drunken, swept-up quiff with something akin to his own unique take on religious, sexual and emotional ecstasy.

“Oh no,” I beam. “It’s No 27. Like A Prayer, by Madonna”

The room has thinned out now, and with six pints of Boddington’s Bitter sweeping through my bloodstream (I’m sure Madonna goes through similar pre-gig preparations) I throw myself into the opening bars. I hit every note with powerful precision, a telling combination of heartfelt passion and camp delight, letting my voice ride with religious purity on the crest of a pounding bassline, feeling the music, letting it surge through me and explode with adrenalin, and love, and soulfulness. This one’s for her. For Sorcha. The love of my life.

And then, as I hit the chorus, I notice Chris Barrie standing at the back of the room, arms folded, watching me intently with a gleeful, bemused smile across his face.

And the whole thing turns to shit.