



THE
U.S.
SCREEN



In the second of our articles on the development of American TV fantasy series, Jon Abbot settles down to another viewing of the stylish Man From UNCLE series.

Here he looks at the climate that fostered this James Bond spin-off, how it made stars of male leads Robert Vaughn and David McCallum, and considers the phenomenal popularity of the Sixties spy series.

“What do you think? We are science-fiction?”
So speaks the mad scientist as he lowers the decapitated head-piece of MGM’s Robby the Robot over guest-star Maurice Evans, portraying an ageing Churchillian politician who has seen better days. He has also had the misfortune to meet his Thatcher-like

predecessor in the somewhat more attractive, but no less dangerous form of Vera Miles as his power-hungry wife! When an old friend turns up at the bridge club a younger man by 25 years, visions of a tempting comeback swim before his eyes . . .

Yes, *The Man From UNCLE* was back although only as a few feature films made up of two-part episodes, which for nearly fifteen years have been Britain’s only access to the 104 episodes produced between September 1964 and January 1968.

A cult series of its day, and a classic contribution to the world of television fantasy, *The Man from UNCLE* was the epitome of Sixties TV madness, up there alongside such firm favourites as *The Monkees*, *The Avengers*, *Lost In Space*, and *Batman*.

The Man From UNCLE was broadcast every Thursday evening on BBC1 at 8.00 strategically placed between *Top of The Pops* at 7.30 and a ten minute *News* at 8.50. For schoolkids, teenagers, and bemused adults alike, it was a weekly ritual in the days when a programme time-change, even for a U.S. import, was



big news, and every series had a regular time-slot.

The series launched the careers of its two leads Robert Vaughn and David McCallum, although both had been working regularly before *UNCLE*. Vaughn had made his debut in the embarrassing Roger Corman cheapie *Teenage Caveman* in 1958, and in 1960 appeared in *The Magnificent Seven* to somewhat greater critical acclaim. McCallum had appeared in a number of films prior to *UNCLE*, including *The Great Escape* in 1963 and had two excellent episodes of *The Outer Limits* among his TV credits. Their boss at *UNCLE*, Mr. Alexander Waverley, was played by the elderly and experienced actor Leo G. Carroll, best known to fantasy buffs for his starring roles in the 1955 Jack Arnold film *Tarantula* and the 1953-56 TV series *Topper*.

NATIONAL HEROES

Robert Vaughn as the smooth hero Napoleon Solo and David McCallum as the shy and more introvert Illya Kuryakin, became the national heroes of the day. As writer Richard Meyers has pointed out, Illya even started a fashion trend with his style of dress. "I imagine that will be on my tombstone", the dour young Scot was quoted as saying to the press. "Here lies Illya Kuryakin".

The idea initially had been quite simply to do James Bond on TV, and executive producer Norman Felton went directly to the source – Ian Fleming, creator of Bond. Fleming was quite taken with Felton's concept of the series. Each week, a guest-star playing

an ordinary, everyday person, would be swept into the spy milieu for a light-hearted caper with the two special agents of a mysterious world-saving organisation. He suggested to Felton a minor character from one of the Bond novels called Solo, a swarthy syndicate man who they transformed into a suave, woman-chasing good guy.

At this point, Fleming was forced to drop out of the project, partly through ill health, and also due to his contractual obligations with United Artists, the makers of the Bond films, and screenwriter Sam Rolfe was brought in. Rolfe enthusiastically created an entire world for the Solo character to inhabit, which he devised in scrupulous detail, giving Solo his first name of Napoleon, his partner Illya, the *UNCLE* organisation itself, and their chief nemesis, *THRUSH*. This was a super-powerful criminal organisation controlled by three computers operated by the enigmatic Council at *THRUSH* Central. Only one of these computers could be active at a time, with the other two constantly on the move to avoid detection. *THRUSH* employed agents everywhere from mercenaries to accountants, from money-men to corrupt scientists, all with one thing in common... a lust for absolute power.

In direct contrast to their own mobility, *THRUSH* knew exactly where *UNCLE* was located. There were five *UNCLE* bases. The primary one tucked behind an innocent-looking tailor's shop, Del Floria's, in the heart of New York's East Side. The very first episode opens with a ruthless *THRUSH* attack on the *UNCLE* base, thus allowing view-

ers an immediate demonstration of the flawless *UNCLE* security system – colour-coded badges for various levels, with alarm bells and numerous sliding doors (parodied in the spy-spoof TV series *Get Smart*) for illegal intruders – as well as the audience's first glimpse of Solo. Solo's entrance is dramatic, and became the opening symbol of the series during its first year. He is apparently a silent, standing target in the shadows, but the *THRUSH* bullets hit only a bulletproof transparent shield, the glass ineffectually cracking as Solo stands there motionless and unharmed. Defeated and captured, the *THRUSH* agents suddenly curl up and die, a suicide squad that has ingested poison. Thus the scene was set, and the situation established for the rest of the series.

ESCAPISM NOT JINGOISM

In his book *Tube of Plenty*, TV historian Erik Barnouw remarks that "public acceptance of a foreign policy based on good guy/bad guy premises may have been reinforced by a telefilm mythology of similar obsessions". He goes on to cite the preponderance in the mid-Sixties of war series (none of them set in the then-present of Vietnam) and the spy shows such as *UNCLE*, *Get Smart*, *I Spy*, and the very dubious *Mission Impossible*... but with the exception of the last, most of these seem to have been inspired more by the need for unrealistic fluff following the Kennedy assassination coupled with the James Bond fad, then by the post-Kennedy politics of the period. In fact, critics of Cold War TV often seem to miss the fact that the *UNCLE* show featured an American and a Russian working in harmony against a mutual enemy of global dimensions.

In a 1964 copy of *TV Guide*, Sam Rolfe announced, "We didn't want to do anything actually connected with the government, because then we'd be doing anti-Communist stuff every week". "It's a rather good charade" said Robert Vaughn, "and nobody is pretending it's more than that".

Certainly, there was an abundance of 'Cold War' television at the time, even in fantasy shows, the category in which *The Man From UNCLE* belonged. In *The Invaders*, Roy Thinnes' character often referred to the aliens from space as a "foreign power" or "hostile power" by means of gaining allies who might otherwise not have believed his apparently paranoid fantasies, while in Irwin Allen's *Lost In Space*, the bumbling saboteur Doctor Smith was labelled "enemy agent." Even the normally pacifist *Star Trek* offered a tyrannical race of "Klingons" not too far removed from a Forties-style of oriental "Yellow Peril" in appearance, in the grand tradition of the movie serial *Flash Gordon* ▶



Above left: Leo G. Carroll, David McCallum, and Robert Vaughn. This picture: A scene from an *Uncle* feature film - *The Spy in the Green Hat*.

and the villainous Ming. Next to all this, and the particularly overt and explicit political series on the air, *The Man From UNCLE* was noticeably innocuous and innocent, perhaps even encouragingly progressive.

"People thought it (UNCLE) stood for Uncle Sam, which it didn't" *UNCLE* creator Sam Rolfe told an interviewer in the Sixties, "or the U.N., which it didn't. Finally . . . we had to make something to fit." The name, it was decided during pre-production, would be an acronym for United Network Command for Law Enforcement (which the programme politely thanked for the co-operation in the end credits of every show!) Next, enthusiastic about this decision, Rolfe divided *UNCLE* up into operational sections, each efficiently linked with the next. Sections one to eight were Policy and Operations, Operations and enforcement, Enforcement and intelligence, Intelligence and Communications, Communications and Security, Security and Personnel, Propaganda and Finance, and Camouflage and Deception! Against this detailed and specific background the *UNCLE* adventures were constructed. It could safely be argued that it was this attention to detail that gave the *UNCLE* phenomenon its strength and longevity, for all these details contributed noticeably to the programme. As for *THRUSH*, "it was a safety device. If I wanted someone to do something really awful, and I couldn't think of a good motive, I'd say 'Well, he's doing it for *THRUSH*!'" Such basic TV logic was not enough for the fan clubs of the day, who asked if *THRUSH* could stand for Technological Hierarchy for the Removal of Undesirables and the Subjugation of Humanity! In the face of such avid enthusiasm, the producers did the only thing they could do. They said yes!

This casual attitude toward *UNCLE*'s prime (but not exclusive) antagonist also extended to the production. The famous, specially designed *UNCLE* guns cost \$35,000 for four. The *THRUSH* guns and other paraphernalia were cobbled together out of bits and pieces. The famous *UNCLE* pen-communicator made its debut in the second season ("Open Channel D!") – in the first, Solo spoke surreptitiously into his cigarette case!

CINEMA PILOT

With the Bond craze in full flow – three 007 films had been released at this time – it made sense to release the pilot film in Europe to the cinemas. This was a common practice with TV movies (*Duel*, *Baffled*) and TV series pilots such as *The Incredible Hulk* and *Battlestar Galactica* (although it should be noted that the 1966 *Batman* feature was made specifically for the cinema). This move created a curious anomaly. In the U.S., when the final format for *The Man From*

UNCLE had been decided on (its pre-production title had been *Solo*) parts of the pilot, "The Vulcan Affair", were refilmed to include Leo G. Carroll as Mr Waverley, and specify the enemy as *THRUSH*. However, the cinema version was the pilot in its original form, with Will Kuluva as *UNCLE* boss Mr Allison, and the enemy organisation named as *WASP*. Significantly, David McCallum is way down the cast list, not yet having attained the status of co-star. Kuryakin had originally been intended to play Tonto to Solo's Lone Ranger, in much the same way as Mr Spock of *Star Trek* was only intended to be a minor, secondary character. Instead, McCallum's part rapidly grew in stature over the weeks as the character grew in popularity, serving fortunately to distance the series even further from its origins as a blatant *James Bond* rip-off, a factor which had already caused some rumbings at rival studio United Artists, where the Bond films were made. Although Solo was portrayed as the womaniser – and of course enjoyed considerable popularity – it was for McCallum's shy loner that fan mail arrived at MGM by the lorry-load, and Illya was the heart-throb of the day.

GOOD PEDIGREE

Contributors to the series included a remarkable number of names who would later go on to greater fame. Directors included Richard Donner (who directed over 200 different television series, including the "Nightmare at 20,000 Feet" episode of *The Twilight Zone* remade in the movie, before going on to helm fantasy films such as *The Omen*, *Superman*, and *Ladyhawke*), Joseph Sargent (who moved to films and TV movies after a career in TV that included the pilot film for *The Invaders*), Marc Daniels (frequent *Star Trek* director), Barry Shear (ace crime show director and frequent contributor to the spin-off *Girl From UNCLE* series), John Brahm (noted for his *Twilight Zone* and *Outer Limits* work), Michael Ritchie (later director of such minor cult movie classics as *Smile*, *Prime Cut*, and *The Candidate*), George Waggner (a *Batman* regular after an early career in Universal horror movies of the Forties), John Newland (director and host of the supernatural anthology *One Step Beyond*, and behind the camera on many episodes of *Boris Karloff's Thriller*), Alf Kjellin (an *Alfred Hitchcock Hour* regular, and director on many other spy shows of the *UNCLE* period), Alvin Ganzer and E. Darrell Hallenbeck.

Writers on the series included Peter Fields (who appears to be chiefly a rewrite man), Dick Nelson, Alan Caillou (also an occasional actor), Dean Hargrove, Robert Hill, Stanley Ralph Ross (who developed *Batman* and *Wonder Woman* for television), Joseph Cavella, Norman Hudis, Stanford Sherman, and

Robert Thompson (producer on *Mission Impossible* and *Harry O*).

As is often customary with many U.S. series, the episode titles all had some sort of distinctive conformity to unite them. Burke's Law, for example, always began its titles with "Who Killed . . .?", *Perry Mason* was "The Case Of . . .". In *The Man From UNCLE*'s case, every episode was the something-or-other "Affair". Each of the four acts (clearly marked, in the manner of the Quinn Martin series) was additionally prefaced with a relevant quote of deliberately ambiguous dialogue from that particular segment of the episode.

Notable episodes of interest include "The Shark Affair" in which Robert Culp hams it up as a modern-day pirate stealing spectacularly useless booty, while in "The Mad, Mad Tea Party Affair" the infallible and highly elaborate *UNCLE* security system is thrown into disarray when one elderly man effortlessly walks in at a crucial moment. In "The Galatea Affair", Joan Collins plays a Bronx girl who must be educated *Pygmalion* fashion to impersonate a baroness in the employ of *THRUSH*, while in "The My Friend The Gorilla Affair", Vitina Marcu (green girl Athena from *Lost In Space*) plays a female *Tarzan*! In "The Bow-Wow Affair", dogs are conditioned to do the villains' dirty work and in "The Birds And The Bees Affair", it's bees. Humans are also duped, bribed, brainwashed, hypnotised, or threatened into doing *THRUSH* handiwork; in "The Her Master's Voice Affair", students in an elite girls' school are hypnotically programmed to do *THRUSH*'s bidding. In "The Children's Day Affair" *THRUSH* infiltrates a boys' school. Elsa Lanchester of *Bride of Frankenstein* fame dons similar fright-mask garb as a splendidly loopy lady adversary in "The Brain Killer Affair", while Eddie Albert plays a demented revivalist preacher in "The Love Affair"! In "The Double Affair" Solo is confronted by a lookalike imposter, while in "The Man From *THRUSH* Affair" he in turn impersonates a *THRUSH* official, striding purposefully into a cavernous *THRUSH* complex with the same air of confident menace he would bring to many later villainous roles.

In the early Seventies, various ITV regions revived the show briefly, screening a handful of the later episodes mostly from the over-the-top third season in obscure time-slots, but it's the two-part episodes that were stitched together as films for the cinema to exploit the Bond market more directly, that have turned up more frequently, first on ITV, and more recently back on the BBC. A few years ago, the BBC screened one paltry episode of the hour-long *UNCLE* shows and while obviously dated, none of the original magic of the series had been lost. ♦

