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[Contents](#) | [Previous](#) | [Next](#)

Curly's Airships feature on BBC Radio 4's *Afternoon Shift* 15th July 1997

A Transcript by Steve Smith

[Presenter]

"Hello, today's program is rooted in the earth but up in the air. Katy Walsh will be introducing us to some people with whom she shares a particular passion for trees..."

<Snip>

[Presenter]

"A man blinded by a different passion is Judge Smith, composer of a soon to be completed Songstory about the ill-fated trip of the airship R101. In 1930 this was a pride and joy of the Secretary of State for Air, Lord Thomson, who, in Smith's work, sums up his feelings like this..."

[Judge Smith Singing]

This is magnificent! I shall fly this ship to India and back
Just before I speak at the Imperial conference next October.
Fresh from a record breaking flight,
With a speech on Air Travel and the Empire.
For the Government, a major coup, and for me, a modest promotion."

[Presenter]

"Well, it wasn't a modest promotion but an untimely death that Lord Thomson met aboard the R101. The story of this unusual musical theme, and the current state of the airship industry are both subjects we're going to be coming back to."

<Snip>

[Presenter]

"An innovative and unlikely project is nearing completion. Judge Smith whose musical credentials include the co-founding of the late 60's, mind-bending band, Van der Graaf Generator, has been working for years on a creation called "Curly's Airships", the story in words and music of the great R101 airship disaster. "The R101 was a gigantic dirigible; one seventh of a mile long and a hundred and thirty feet high. It exploded over Northern France en-route to India on the 4th of October 1930 killing all but 6 on board including Lord Thomson, the Secretary of State for Air at the time.

"Now, let's face it, it's a pretty strange subject for a rock project so we sent Dilly Barlow along to inspect Curly's Airships, the latest musical phenomenon."

<Electric guitar arpeggios with echo playing in background>



[Dilly Barlow voices over]

"In the front room of an unassuming bungalow in a quiet village in the depths of East Sussex, Judge Smith is adding yet another layer to his complex, musical work."

[JS Speaking]

"This is a bit that happens shortly after the ship is actually launched, and it's Curly, who loves airships, talking about how beautiful it all is and covering the surreal element of this gigantic, solid thing hanging in the air."

[John Ellis]

"This kinda sound correct?"

<Plays arpeggios>

[JS]

"Yes"

[JE]

"Very 'floaty'"

[JS]

"Yeah, that'll work"

[DB voice over JE's playing]

"Ex Vibrator, turned Strangler, guitarist John Ellis is working on his distinctive interpretation."

[JE]

"Yeah? Something like that? Or, d'you want more *<plays chord>* more 'splangy'?"

<plays chord>

[JS]

"No, try the arpeggios"

[JE]

"OK"

[DB voice over]

"Long before the Oscar winning Broadway musical 'The Titanic' was ever thought of, Judge had become obsessed by giving a musical treatment to the tragic tale of the R101"

[JS voice over]

"I wanted to write a long piece of narrative rock music that told a story. It was going to take a very long time (it's, so far, taken me between 3½ and 4 years) so it had to be something that I was very interested in and I had been long interested in the legend of the R101 airship disaster and, because that fulfilled my criteria for a story, I picked that, quite deliberately, as a subject for the piece."

[JE to JS]

"Alright start running... it's running"

<Tape rolling so JE can do overdub>

[JS as Curly singing on tape]

"Susie had shown me paintings by some new, mad artists
Who painted their dreams.
This airship looked like that.
Something impossible; a surrealistic vision"

[DB voice over]

"An unlikely story for a musical work, perhaps, yet Judge had no difficulty in persuading a clutch of high-calibre musicians to assist:

- Singer-songwriter, Peter Hammill
- Pete Brown, lyricist for Cream
- Organist, Hugh Banton
- The God of Hell fire himself, Arthur Brown
- and two members of the Stranglers: Vocalist, Paul Roberts and guitarist, John Ellis"

[JE voice over]

"Well I'd heard a lot of Judge's stuff before, which I absolutely loved, and I'm a bit of a glutton for punishment anyway. This is a fantastic job for a guitarist to get his teeth into because there's so many different things happening. And, it's just a brilliant story anyway"

[DB voice over]

"And, what's more, Judge has coerced his guest artists into performing for nothing. Well, almost."

[JS to DB]

"Yes, well, of course, I can't pay anybody for doing all this so they're all getting 'Curly Coupons', which will be, eventually, exchangeable against huge amounts of money that I'm going to make from royalties."

[DB]

"Do you think they're worth as much as a 'Taylor'?"

[JS]

"Ah yes, well, we're thinking of going in for some sort of exchange rate mechanism of

tying the 'Curly Coupon' to the 'Taylor'."

<JE laughing in background.>

[DB]

"I think I'd prefer to have a 'Curly Coupon' than a 'Taylor', actually. Don't tell anybody, I think they're probably worth a bit more."

[DB voice over]

"This musical creation will first see the light of day as a double CD, and then Judge will tour the country with Curly's Airships giving a one-man performance as Curly himself."

[JS]

"Well, Curly McCloud is the narrator of this piece; he's the storyteller. He's a fictional airship officer and the whole story is told from the point of view of a Junior Airship Officer with all the prejudices that that implies.

"Quite early on in the piece there's a chapter called 'Curly takes us up' and it is an airship flight. It's as if we're being taken on a guided tour and he shows us what's going on, and introduces us to the different people and the sights and even the smells, which were very distinctive as I understand it. So he is actually like an enthusiastic...

whereas I hope I'm not an airship anorak, dear old Curly certainly is, and he expects everybody to be thrilled to bits with airships. So I've got him saying things like:

[JS singing]

"Smell that smell; that's the Airship Smell!
The sweet, heavy scent of aircraft dope,
The sour, animal odour of the gas bags.
There's a whiff of petrol and, everywhere,
The indefinable bouquet of hydrogen.

<crossfade to recorded version with music>

[JS singing]

The textbooks tell you that it's got no smell,
But that's rot!
It's all around us, leaking from the bags,
Or venting from the valves.
Get too much down you and your voice goes daft;
Too much more and you pass out cold!
And losing your footing here's a poor idea;
You could fall straight through the envelope to Glory!

[JS as Rigger looking for gas leak singing to DB]

"My baby flashes those blue eyes
and sends me flying in blue skies.
She's got me

<voice flips to hydrogen induced falsetto>

sky high in love! Oh bloody hell!
Up here Fred, found the bugger!

[JS]

"There'll be an actor doing this part. You see, they actually did sing when they went around inspecting for leaks, the riggers kept singing, so it's a gift, if I'm telling the story in music, to have one of the riggers up there singing away and then his voice shifts into this helium mode/hydrogen mode when he finds the leak. And this is actually genuine; this is actually what happened. We had these Jolly Jack tars wandering around the gas bags singing away because they really needed to otherwise they might, you know, could easily fall through the... go unconscious and fall through the envelope."

[DB voice over]

"So, what is this strange hybrid that Judge has created?"

[JS]

"It isn't a musical; people don't come on and sing at each other. It isn't a rock opera. It's storytelling done with words and music; so John Ellis came up with the term Songstory (one word) and I've used that to describe it. It is a Songstory."

[JE]

"Apparently, I have a friend in Germany and when I mentioned it to him, he said that there's a.. there actually has been a tradition in Germany for several centuries, apparently. It's called a Benklesinger who was a man who went around telling factual stories with the use of illustrations which, as he sang or told the story, he pointed to the illustrations. And really, I think that when Judge takes this out on the road as a one-man show, he'll be actually carrying on that tradition, strangely enough."

[DB]

"And let's hope that Curly's Airships, the songstory, meets a better fate than the airship of Lord Thomson, the villain of the piece?"

[JS]

"It's perhaps unfair to villainize the guy. He could equally be called the tragic hero. It's his fatal flaw that sends everybody to their death; and this is a song sung by him shortly after the ship is launched, when everybody is very optimistic about the future, and he's anticipating flying to India on a triumphant visit which will aid his aim to become the next Viceroy of India. This part is sung by Peter Hammill, who's a magnificent vocalist as well as being a great composer. Unfortunately his voice isn't on there yet, but I've got the music so I'll sing his part; I'll try and do an imitation of Peter Hammill..

<starts tape>

[JS]

"Descending from the clouds above the Indus,
My flying palace wafts me to Karachi.
A Mythological hero from the Mahabartah.
They're sure to give me the job,
The job that's made for me,
The Viceroy of India!
The Viceroy of India.

[JS Voice over]

"I think it's a very sad, tragic story. Obviously, I've looked at it with a certain degree of wry humour, partially because that's the kind of attitude that they looked at life with: a Devil-may-care approach to life. Everything was a bit of a joke and Curly fits into that ethos very strongly; so things do have a humorous edge, though I hope the serious tragedy of the thing comes across."

[Music fades up, JS and Arthur Brown singing]

"Anything else was the unspeakable thing, the Final Taboo!
"It's the silence that kills you!"

[JS & Peter Hammil]

"Don't break the silence!"

<Fade out>



Running time of the feature approximately 11 minutes

[Navigation](#) - [Specifications](#) - [Ship's Manifest](#) - [Meet The Captain](#) - [Flight Plan](#)
[Joyrides](#) - [Flight Debriefings](#) - [Crew's Quarters](#) - [Curly's Snapshots](#)
[Chart Room](#) - [Passenger List](#) - [Ship's Log](#) - [Purser's Office](#)

[Home](#) | [Top](#) | [Previous](#) | [Next](#)