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Curly's Airships feature on HTV's *Frieze Frame* 10th July 1997

A Transcript by Steve Smith & Steven Defoe

The program opens with Peter Hammill singing into microphone & wearing headphones:

[PH singing]

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

Cross fade to Judge in close up. (Interior):

[JS speaking]

"I call this piece a SongStory, that is to say it's a narrative work of storytelling using words and music and its subject is the 1930, R101 disaster. What happened was, in the late 20's, the British Government built the biggest airship in the world, a seventh of a mile long, this is as big as the biggest ocean liner, floating in the air. On its maiden flight, supposedly flying to India, it crashed and almost everybody on board, 50 or so people, died".

While JS is speaking, original film is shown of the R101 at its mooring mast. Cross fade via image and sound of fire to PH in studio:

[PH singing]

"This is magnificent.
I shall fly this ship to India and back."

[Voice over by JS with PH still singing in background]

"I've had no support in making this CD, so I've had to call on all my old friends. I've known Peter Hammill for years, ever since we formed Van Der Graaf Generator together in the late '60s. Apart from his influence on me as a composer, the main reason I've asked him to sing is because he's such a tremendously powerful performer."



Cross fade back to Judge:

[JS speaking]

"And without his earlier work, it would have been impossible for me to even conceive the idea of putting together a long piece of narrative word and music like this."

Back to PH in studio:

[PH singing]

"Those fools are afraid.
They're yellow all through.
That ship is quite safe"

Judge and Arthur Brown sitting at the console next to PH

[Voice over by JS]

"The theatrical possibilities of rock music have always been important to me and out of all of this has come the idea of developing Curly's Airships as a piece of one-man musical theatre. It's been tremendously exciting recording in Peter's studio in Bath, particularly with Arthur Brown, another rock legend."

[PH still singing]

"But nothing after 1930, nothing after the age of 55..."

[PH removes headphones and speaks to JS]

"I seem to have the role of the superstitious, power maniac here, Judge"

[JS]

"Ah, yes, sorry about that. He is the villain of the piece, I guess but a very intr..."

[PH laughing]

"Thank you"

[JS Laughing]

"Some ones gotta do it. But a very charismatic, very charismatic guy. He is the Minister of Air at this time. If this thing didn't work, he was finished politically. so he

would stop at nothing to make it happen."

Fade to JS & AB at microphone:

[JS voice over]

"And Arthur's unique! He's one of the supreme rock vocalists of our time."

[AB singing]

"We were Service. Do you see?"

[JS voice over]

"He was the first person to link rock music and theatre together. With The Crazy World of Arthur Brown in the late '60s, he invented characters, fantastic characters with robes and masks and make-up, and presented them as mini dramas with his band on stage."

[JS & AB singing together]

"It's the silence that kills you"

[PH & JS]

"Don't break the silence"

[JS & AB]

"It's the silence that kills you"

[PH & JS]

"Don't break the silence"

Video sequence with car arriving on gravel drive, Lene Lovich as Princess disembarks and enters large house

[PH singing]

"Lord of a county, at the Hand of Imperial Power.
As near as damn it to Royalty itself.
And then I'll lay my Viceregal crown
At the feet, the adorable feet,
The haughty and proud and desirable feet,
The feet of my Princess.
Worthy at last of the feet of my Princess.
Viceroy and Vicereign, me and my Princess"

Back to PH, J & A at console:

[AB speaking]

"What's this thing about feet, Judge"

[JS]

"Well, er, obviously I've got to extrapolate the guy's motives and character, you know, from the available information but.."

[AB]

Sounds disgusting!"

[JS laughing]

"The thing that gives rise to it is that, when the airship crashed and they were going through the wreckage, they found, underneath the ashes, a single, woman's, high-heeled shoe. The worry was, had a woman been smuggled on board the airship, and the Government instituted a top-level security investigation and they found, eventually, that this shoe had belonged to Lord Thomson who, apparently, used to take it around with him, though what he wanted it for, nobody knew!"

[AB]

"Did he sniff it or what?"

[JS laughing]

"We don't know. So that's the origin for his, kind of, interest in the subject in his song"

[PH]

"Was it the Princess's shoe? Do we know that?"

[JS]

"No, we don't. We don't know, it was just a woman's shoe"

Video of Lena Lovich's feet as she walks across a wooden floor towards Carl Rigg as Lord Thomson who is sitting in a chair:

[Voiceover PH]

"But he was obsessed by the Princess?"

[Voiceover JS]

"He was obsessed by the Princess."

Video fade to studio:

[JS to AB]

"He was having an affair with this Romanian Princess"

[AB]

"Is this the one played by Lene Lovich?"

[JS]

"That's it, yeah. I've got them doing tangos and so on, he's clearly.."

[PH]

"A bit demi-monde really, is he?"

[JS]

"Yeah, he's a great ladies' man, very debonair, dashing and so on, so he'd be Tango Man. Tango Man, 1929"

[AB to PH]

"What's 'demi-monde', if one might ask?"

[PH]

"A little bit sort of iffy, you know, society and not quite society."

[PH to JS]

"Was there an element of that in....."

Sound fades as video cross fades to split screen; Carl Rigg holding telephone handset to ear & PH at microphone. CR mimes to PH singing, voice of Airship Captain heard from telephone. LL as Princess seen through the window into the garden:

[Captain on telephone]

"Minister, the situation is really not good. I think attempting the India flight would be very unwise at the moment."

[PH singing]

"You realise Erwin this is most irregular"

[Captain]

"Sir, forgive me but I can't believe you are in full possession of all the facts!"

[PH]

"Your superiors have assured me."

[Captain]

"As things stand, it's not safe!"

[PH]

"My advisers are confident"

[Captain]

"We're simply not ready!"

[PH]

"I must insist on the programme being adhered to.
I have made my plans accordingly.
The Great British Public is all keyed up.
Our hands are to the plough, no turning back."

[Captain]

"As Captain, I can't take responsibility for the safety of the ship!"

[PH]

"All right, if you're afraid, don't go.
We can easily replace you.
Surprised at you showing the white feather."

[Captain]

"Well, if you put it like that, Secretary of State, there's no more to be said. I will do my duty."

[PH]

"Very well, now that's better!
Gung ho, man! That's the spirit!
Yes, of course, we can disregard this conversation."

Video cross fade to garden. CR enters from house and crosses path to join LL who is drinking cocktail by the balustrade. PH sings in voice over as Lord Thomson's thoughts. Both go down to a bench by the river:

[PH]

"Those fools are afraid,
They're yellow all through,
That ship is quite safe. Damn that gypsy crone!
That ignorant peasant in Bucharest.
Can't get her off my mind,
And the things she said when she read my palm."

In video, spectre of Pilot and Officer [played by AB & JS] fade in and out as they walk up the path in the garden:

[PH]

" A glorious future, the world at my feet,
But nothing after 1930, nothing after the age of 55!
Said she couldn't see any further,
I gave her more money but she shook her head.
But I know India is waiting for me,
And faint heart never won a Princess.
So, just keep your nerve
And show them the whip!
Ride them all hard
And show them the whip!"

LL takes off shoes & motions as though to step into the river. CR picks up one of her shoes. Cross fade to weed in river waving in current. Superimposed view of car departing as funereal drum beat sounds. Cross fade to original film of R101 in flight with sound of aero engines. Cross fade to flames and roar of gas burning. Cross fade to smoke rising with orange glow behind. Two shadows on smoke as J and AB walk up ridge towards camera. JS is Ship's officer, AB is Pilot:



[AB Singing]

"We were Service, do you see?"

[J Singing]

"Follow orders, don't make waves"

[JS & AB]

"Keep your eyes on your Duty! We survived the War,"

[AB]

"And now we're hopelessly,"

[JS]

"Helplessly,"

[JS & AB]

"Hideously brave."

[JS]

"Anything else would be letting the side down."

[AB]

"Anything else was never discussed."

[JS & AB]

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

[PH & JS]

"Don't break the silence!"

[JS & AB]

"It's the silence that kills you!"

[PH & JS]

"Don't break the silence!"

"Don't break the silence!"

Audio fades to funereal drum beat. Video cross fade to stark scene in monochrome, twisted metal, burnt wreckage & debris, water in puddles. A hand picks LL's shoe from a puddle:

[JS sings]

"They took them back,
Those hard, black, crusty, anonymous, stinking things!
Things that we didn't need now!"
Back to the Lying-in-State, the Grand Cortège,
The silent crowd, a half a million strong."

Video cross fade to vintage film of state funeral procession with massed crowd lining route:

[JS]

"That official, noble grief we British do so bloody well.
Back to the mass grave and the muffled drum."

Fade to black. Credits roll.

Running time of the feature 11minutes 55 seconds

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