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CURLY'S AIRSHIPS is an epic work of words and music about the R.101 airship disaster of 1930, written in a new form of narrative rock music called **songstory**.

This double CD involves eighteen featured performers, among whom are four of the original members of **Van der Graaf Generator**, including respected solo artist **Peter Hammill** and the composer of Curly's Airships, **Judge Smith**. Also participating are singer **Arthur Brown** (of The Crazy World), **Pete Brown** (of Battered Ornaments and Piblokto), **Paul Roberts** (of **The Stranglers**), **John Ellis**, (formerly of **The Vibrators** and **The Stranglers**), plus a 1920's dance band, a classical Tenor, an Indian music ensemble and several cathedral organs.

Six years in the making, Curly's Airships is probably one of the largest and most ambitious single pieces of rock music ever recorded.

ENTER



CONTACT US: To contact us on all matters, Email [**messages@curlysairships.com**](mailto:messages@curlysairships.com)

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CURLY'S AIRSHIPS tells the true story of the bizarre events which led to the destruction of the world's biggest airship, the giant dirigible R.101, on its maiden voyage to India; a tale of the incompetence and arrogance of government bureaucrats, the ruthless ambition of a powerful politician and the moral cowardice of his juniors; a story of inexplicable psychic phenomena, the thoughtless bravery of 1920s aviators and the extraordinary spell cast by the gigantic machines they flew: the giant airships, the most surreal and dreamlike means of transport ever devised.



His Majesty's Airship R.101 and a two story house at the same scale

Curly's Airships is available now; visit the [PURSER'S OFFICE](#) for more information.

Curly invites you take a tour of this site to get a flavour of the work. Here's what you'll find.

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What You Get When You Buy Curly's Airships



THE MUSIC:

Double CD pack containing...

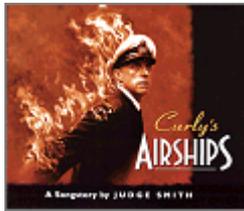
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 - 'What is Songstory?'
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 - 'The Composer's Toolshed'
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 - 'Notes on the Text and Glossary' (including all the period slang and turns-of-phrases that may be unfamiliar to some)
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The Historical Facts Behind Curly's Airships

The conquest of the air was a major preoccupation of the 1920s, and in Great Britain the development of a practical form of long distance air travel was considered to be of vital national importance. Aeroplanes would not develop sufficient performance for regular intercontinental passenger services until the '30s, and many believed that the future of commercial flight lay in the development of rigid airships. There was serious and at times bitter rivalry for government patronage between the supporters of lighter- and heavier-than-air transport.

The first British 'rigids' were copies of the German Zeppelins that had bombed the country during the First World War: recreations of crashed or captured airships. The culmination of this programme of imitation was the construction of the R.38: an ill-considered attempt to improve on the final class of wartime Zeppelins. These were high-altitude ships, originally intended to be used for the bombing of New York, gigantic and dangerously frail. However, the War Office set even greater performance targets for its team of designers and the result was the biggest airship of its time, hopelessly fragile in construction and perilously over-powered (to achieve the power-to-weight ratio demanded by Whitehall).

The ship was not delivered by the Royal Airship Works until 1921, at a time when resources and official interest in airship development were temporarily in eclipse. In America however, enthusiasm for airships was running high, and the British Government decided to dispose of this white elephant by selling it to the U.S. Navy as quickly as possible.

An American crew was swiftly trained to fly their new ship home and a perfunctory programme of tests and trials was carried out with unseemly haste. Some senior airship officers and officials were alarmed at the obvious shortcomings of the craft and the dangers of attempting a transatlantic flight in it, but their objections were overruled and the airship was formally handed over to the Americans. A final acceptance flight was in progress when a foolish attempt to carry out emergency turns resulted in the airship dropping to pieces in the air with the loss of most of the forty-nine lives on board.

Almost unbelievably, the Government then made attempts to obtain payments for the airship from the U.S.A.

After three years of official disinterest in lighter-than-air flight, the Government of the day adopted the so-called Imperial Airship Scheme and a horribly familiar cycle of events was once more set in motion. Two new and highly ambitious airships were to be commissioned, each capable of flying a hundred passengers to Canada or India in luxury: one to be built by the Royal Airship Works and one by private enterprise. These ships were to fly in competition with each other, with the 'winning' design becoming the forerunner of a national airship fleet. This initial concept, itself the product of a political compromise, meant that the country's available airship design expertise (never an over-abundant resource) would be split into two rival teams: teams who had good practical reason for secrecy and mutual distrust.



Sheds 1 and 2 at the Royal Airship Works, Cardington, home of R.101 and R.100 respectively

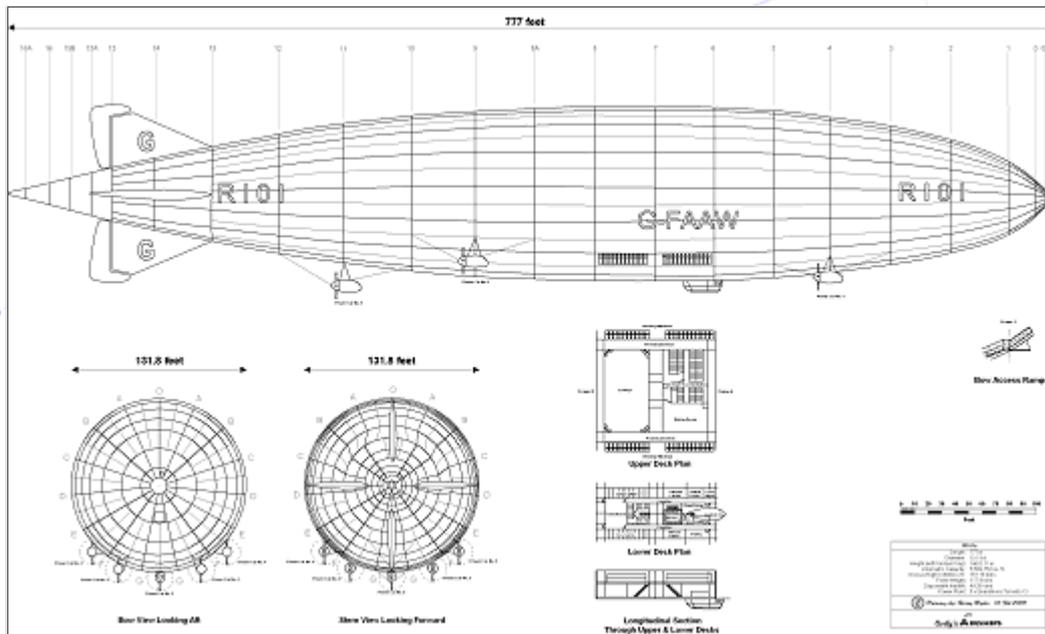
Once again a Whitehall design committee imposed potentially fatal demands on the designers, but, on this occasion, haunted by the memory of the R.38 disaster, they were determined that flimsy construction was to be avoided at all costs. Accordingly they laid down such over-stringent standards of strength and rigidity that it has been calculated that the new ships were each as much as 25% heavier than they need have been. In this new-found zeal for safety, it was also decreed that normal, petrol-fuelled aero-engines were unsafe for use in hot climates due to the increased risk of fire - a wonderful piece of official illogic in view of the fact that the airship would already be full of five million cubic feet of potentially explosive hydrogen gas.

The 'private sector' ship, designated the R.100, was built on a restricted budget by a subsidiary of Vickers and designed by the brilliant young engineer Barnes Wallis. The Government ship, the R.101, was essentially designed by a committee, including some of the same team responsible for the ill-fated R.38, working with almost unlimited funds at their disposal but severely handicapped by endless official interference and bureaucratic obstruction.

Much responsibility for this must be laid at the door of Lord Thomson, The Secretary Of State for Air during the crucial periods of the project. A powerful politician with a reputation for getting things done, he publicly identified himself with the progress of the Government ship to the extraordinary extent of taking as his title 'Baron Thomson of Cardington', the site of the Royal Airship Factory. His political career was in fact irrevocably linked to the success of the R.101: a situation which was to have tragic consequences.

Whereas construction of the R.100 proceeded in relative obscurity, Lord Thomson's Air Ministry ensured that every stage of the R.101's development was conducted in a blaze of publicity. The airship was to be a symbol of National enterprise and every aspect of its design was to be a technological first. New and experimental techniques, materials and devices of every kind were announced in the Press as having been developed for the ship and, to the despair of the designers, when one by one they were found to be unworkable, 'national prestige', as interpreted by Lord Thomson, demanded that they be incorporated anyway.

Both airships, in fact, were highly experimental in design, larger and more powerful than anything that had been built before. Making a ship capable of carrying a hundred passengers from one side of the world to the other involved fabricating, of light alloy girders and wires, structures of gigantic size but minimum weight, covering them with a weatherproof skin and suspending within them immense gas-bags to lift them into the air. The sheer size of these creations is hard to imagine. The R.101 in its final form was a seventh-of-a-mile long and 130 ft. high, larger than the biggest ocean vessel afloat at the time. And all this had to be achieved without the help of computers, nylon, neoprene or even non-inflammable helium gas. Furthermore they were then flown and navigated without the benefit of radar or satellite weather forecasts. The giant airships represented the extreme cutting edge of the technology of the day and perhaps could only have been the product of the generation who had survived the slaughter of the Great War with their boundless public optimism and disregard of risk.



R.101c in her final extended configuration - 777 feet (237 m) long and 141 feet (43 m) high.

The two ships were not launched until the Autumn of 1929, two years behind the original schedule, and, as the first test flights proceeded, it became increasingly obvious that the privately built R.100 was the better ship. Though not without faults and despite carrying the over-engineered hull demanded by the official specification, it more than fulfilled its performance targets and clearly had the makings of a practical and airworthy vessel.

Barnes Wallis was helped by the fact that, at a relatively early stage, the R.101, as the favoured child of the Air Ministry, had been assigned to the prestigious India route and was therefore subject to the foolish official embargo on the use of petrol in the tropics. The R.100 was to fly to and from Montreal across the North Atlantic and so was able to use tried and tested petrol aero-engines.

The R.101, on the other hand, was obliged to fit diesel motors, which at that time were at a relatively primitive stage of development, and these proved to be both massively heavy and seriously underpowered. In fact the fundamental design of the whole ship, though highly ingenious and of supreme elegance, was simply too heavy and lacking in vital lift. It flew sluggishly and reluctantly in the relentless glare of a publicity machine which was busily proclaiming the ship's triumphant success.

For several months, working under great official pressure, the design team laboured to lighten the ship: stripping out many of the gadgets and systems so proudly announced earlier, ripping out much of the passenger accommodation and, increasingly desperate when this failed to improve performance sufficiently, over-inflating the gas-bags to a dangerous extent.

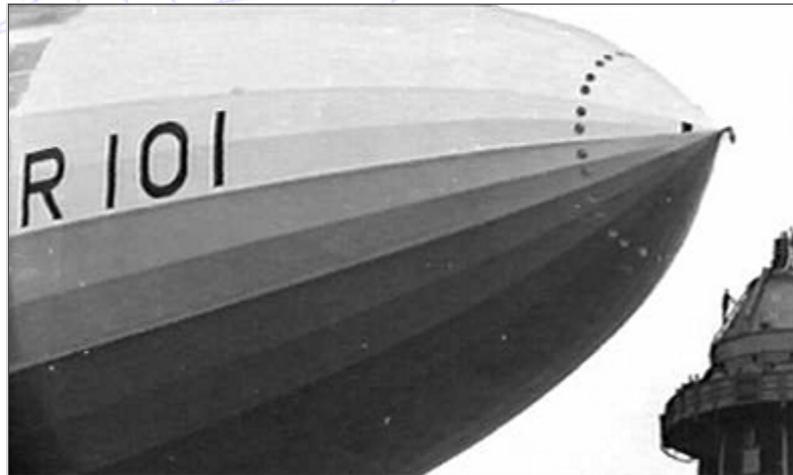
Obliged, as part of the ceaseless publicity drive, to appear at the Hendon Airshow, it cruised to and fro above the enthusiastic crowds who were quite unaware that the beautiful craft was virtually crippled and in danger of dropping out of the sky.

Meanwhile, despite some attempts at delaying tactics, the R.100 could not be prevented from making its maiden voyage to Canada. It crossed the Atlantic, overcoming heavy storms on the way, and made a tour of Canada to enormous popular acclaim before returning safely to a somewhat muted welcome at home.

The relative success of the R.100 brought matters to a head at the Royal Airship Works. Lord Thomson's patience, never very great, was finally exhausted, and he set a deadline for a flight that would take him to India and back. He was in line to be appointed the next Viceroy of India and was determined to make this highly symbolic flight to his new domain and to return in time for the forthcoming Imperial Conference, which he was due to address

on 'Air Travel and the Empire'.

Thomson was both highly romantic and politically ambitious, willing to charm or to bully in order to get the job done. He had been a high-ranking military Staff Officer with the habit of command, while his Ministry officials and the personnel of the Airship Service were virtually all either serving or ex-officers of less exalted rank with the habit of obedience to their C.O.; the cult of the stiff upper lip still prevailed at every level of official and military life. Those who should and could have blown the whistle on this foolhardy venture were paralysed at the prospect of being thought cowardly. Furthermore the Depression was beginning to bite, and few employment opportunities for airshipmen existed outside their beloved Service.



R.101 leaving her mooring mast at Cardington.
Note the ground crew on the masthead.

The R.101 team realised that failure to be ready for this flight would result in the cancellation of the whole project and went ahead at great speed with their final option for improving the ship's performance: cutting the entire thing in two and inserting another bay to hold an additional gas-bag. The work was completed only a few days before the flight to India was due to leave and there was only time for one test flight of what was now a radically different airship. The Air Safety Inspectors, alarmed at this and at the condition of the over-inflated gas-bags which had rapidly begun to deteriorate, declined to issue a Certificate of Airworthiness but, once again, the warnings of experts were disregarded and overruled. On 4th October 1930, the overburdened and leaky monster laboured into the sky and disappeared into gathering rain clouds, carrying a crew of forty-two and a dozen official passengers including the ship's senior designers and Lord Thomson.



The planned route of R.101's Maiden Voyage from Cardington to Karachi, via Ismailia, which ended prematurely and tragically at Beauvais, France.

It seems that many, if not most, of the crew and passengers had profound misgivings about the venture. Very few with any real knowledge of airships could have believed that they would have been able to fly back from Karachi as planned, even if they reached India safely. A common belief seems to have been that the ship would get as far as Egypt, its intermediate destination, but no further. The more pessimistic doubted the ship would achieve so much, and discreet and unofficial arrangements seem to have been made for an emergency landing at Orly Aerodrome outside Paris. There are numerous reports of premonitions and psychic warnings of disaster.

Deteriorating weather conditions sealed the R.101's fate. On the flight south across England, one of the engines failed and, by the time it reached the South Coast, the airship was wallowing in high winds and heavy rain. It seems incredible that the flight was not aborted at this stage, but the airship fought its way out to sea issuing a stream of cheerful radio messages. A few hours later the waterlogged R.101 glided, quite gently, into a hillside near Beauvais in northern France and exploded. Miraculously six men survived. No officers or passengers were among them.



The R.101 memorial above the mass grave at Cardington

The Enquiry which followed the State Funeral of the victims had many of the characteristics

of an official whitewash; no one was deemed to have been in any way to blame for the tragedy; no reputations of brave men were to be impugned. At this point, a bizarre coda to the disaster was played out when a celebrated Spiritualist medium received a series of lengthy and detailed messages from entities claiming to be officers of the R.101. These restless souls apparently wanted to set the record straight on the events of the flight and the months leading up to it. Sceptical friends of the dead men were able to conduct lengthy conversations with them through the entranced medium and became convinced of their validity. Some of the technical details which were disclosed were of such a sensitive nature that the Security Services investigated the medium but failed to establish any 'earthly' source for her information.

The R.100 was forbidden to fly again and was sold for scrap.

Such are the bare outlines of a complex and many-sided episode of recent history. These extraordinary events seem to have the inevitability of a Greek tragedy and I find the story as fascinating today as I did six years ago when I began this project. It is said that no one who ever saw a rigid airship ever forgot the sight; such was the remarkable spell cast by these enormous machines, surely the most surreal and dreamlike mode of transport ever devised. Nor is the climactic image of the story easily forgotten: a stricken airship, gigantic and ethereally beautiful, lashed and driven by the storm and carrying, to a fiery death, brave men trapped by an outmoded code of honour.

We were Service, d'you see?
Follow orders. Don't make waves.
Keep your eyes on your duty.
We survived the War
And now we're hopelessly, helplessly,
Hideously brave.
Anything else would be letting the side down.
Anything else was never discussed.
Anything else was the unspeakable thing,
The final taboo.

It's the silence that kills you.
Don't break the silence.
It's the silence that kills you.
Don't break the silence.

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An Interview With Judge Smith

by Belway Thomas on 14th May 2000

Q.

Can we get one small point cleared up first? Where did you get the name Judge?

A.

I was born with it. I have several forenames and that's one of them. A friend of mine, the late John Hargrave - 'White Fox' - the writer, mystic and leader of the Green Shirts started to use it in the mid-Seventies and other friends followed suit.



Q.

What's your musical background?

A.

I grew up during the Sixties and, musically, my roots are in that decade. But I hope it doesn't show too much!

Q.

Any major influences?

A.

Hundreds, and only some from the Sixties. I could list dozens of names, but often individual recordings were equally important. Bowie, Cream, The Crazy World of Arthur Brown, Sex Pistols, Peter Hammill, Frank Zappa... I've learnt the most from Hammill and Zappa.

Q.

I can't say I hear much of that in your music.

A.

Thank God for that! If your influences can be identified from your own work, then you're not assimilating the stuff properly. It's not going in deep enough, and you end up simply reflecting your influences in the form of imitation. I'd hate to write music that people thought was Bowiesque, and fake Zappa is truly horrible.

Q.

Quite a few of the names you mentioned are involved in 'Curly's Airships' in one way or another.

A.

Yes, I've been very lucky to actually work with some people who were important parts of my artistic education.

Q.

Speaking of education, are you a trained musician or self-taught?

A.

I'm not sure if I think of myself as a musician at all. In terms of conventional musical skills, I can sing, though some may dispute that, and I'm an incompetent drummer. That's about it.

Q.

There must be more to it than that.

A.

Well, I write music, or more correctly, I make up music. I can't actually write it down in dots and bars, and I can't, properly speaking, play it. But on the other hand composing music is not the same as playing it. Music gets played by musicians; it gets written by composers. The jobs are different, even when it's the same guy doing them.

Q.

Do you feel your lack of musical skills limits what you are able to write?

A.

It hasn't so far. I find I'm able to imagine quite complex music in some detail. I can hear it in my head. And by tapping away with one finger, a keyboard and a sequencer, I can slowly build up a picture of what I'm hearing. Sometimes I'll work on this picture until it becomes the finished image, but on other projects, like 'Curly', it remains a sketch for other musicians to listen to and replace with their own contributions.

I'm sure I write better music as a non-musician than I would as an average guitar-strummer. I emphasise the word 'average'. There is a great temptation for a not-very-good musician to write things he or she is able to play, rather than the things he or she is able to imagine. A really good musician, who can play whatever comes into his head doesn't have that problem, but if I can't reach that standard, I personally feel I'm better off not trying to play that riff from 'Smoke on the Water'.

Q.

What is your motivation in spending such an enormous amount of time and energy on a project that is quite so far outside the mainstream?

A.

You make 'Curly' sound a bit weird, but it seems pretty straightforward to me. I suppose my attitude is down to a Sixties thing: the idea that rock n'roll could be a serious art form. It's not a fashionable view at the moment, but there was a brief window of time when it looked as if rock music might have a parallel development alongside regular pop-music, dance music, entertainment music, into something more ambitious, something bigger, more intellectually challenging. What we got, of course, was a lot of pretentious bombast and noodling, with a few notable exceptions. Unfortunately, the people who could have taken the thing forward tended to be also very good at bashing out hit singles. The Money Power is very hard to resist. In fact the music industry and the entire rock culture itself simply doesn't encourage considered, developmental work. I'm trying to avoid the word 'progressive' here; a good word spoilt.

Q.

But you resisted the lures of commercialism?

A.

No fear. I did my best to make money out of rock n'roll. I didn't sell my soul because no one offered to buy it.

Q.

Where did this idea of 'Songstory' come from?

A.

I've always wanted to tell stories with music. Most of my regular, normal-length songs tell stories of one kind or another. I'm less interested in doing straightforward love songs, for example. The telling of stories is a primal human activity; cavemen were doing it. And what do you have to do when you tell stories? You need to convey emotions, atmospheres, moods, excitement; and music is fantastic at doing this. That is what music does. And I think that of all kinds of music, rock music does it best of all. It's the most powerful and versatile communicator of emotions, feelings, moods, vibes... anything intangible, there is. Just add words, language, to cover the other, tangible, stuff: information, narration, facts and so on, and you get what should be the ultimate storytelling medium.

Q.

But is there anything particularly new about that?

A.

No, songwriters are doing it all the time. I just like the idea of doing it on a bigger canvas. I've always liked the few really long classic singles: 'Bohemian Rhapsody', 'Music', 'MacArthur Park', 'Mr Blue Sky', 'Wuthering Heights' and so on. Not the ones that just repeat the same tune over and over, or have long instrumental jams over the riff and five-minute drum solos, I like the ones with lots of different sections and tempo changes, and something different every minute or so.

Q.

But isn't pop music's greatest achievement the three-minute single?

A.

Of course. Don't misunderstand me; I love regular, normal pop records. Three minutes of heaven. But rock n'roll music can do other things as well. Art forms move on; they have to, or they stagnate and die.

Q.

But in this day of short attention spans, do you think people have the time and inclination to sit through two-and-a-quarter hours of music?

A.

Well not everybody. Why should they? But there are plenty of people with the interest and the capacity to follow 'Curly's Airships' through. It's not as if it's difficult music or intellectually obscure. Hundreds of thousands of people read novels, poetry, serious non-fiction that's far more demanding than this, and listen to classical music that's far tougher-going than this. As I said, by those standards, 'Curly' is pretty straightforward. It's just the scale and format which are unusual.

Q.

If not unique.

A.

Well I have to say that I'm unaware of anything else like it.

Q.

And where did your obsession with airships come from?

A.

Hang on a minute. I'm not obsessed with airships. I'm interested in airships. I'm obsessed with music... But I do think that airships are a wonderful metaphor for human aspiration: an escape to heaven from the confines of earth, a simple concept, a beautiful idea, that proves horribly dangerous and difficult to achieve. But the idea of airships has certainly appealed to me my whole life. When I was about thirteen, I met Barnes Wallis, who designed two of the airships I've written about, in his famous drawing office at the old Brooklands race-track. He was rather irritated that this boy wanted to ask him about airships rather than hypersonic flight, which was his consuming passion at that time, so the meeting was not a particular success. And about twenty years ago I was lucky enough to spend some time with Captain George Meager, one of the last surviving rigid airship pilots, and certainly the last living man to have piloted the R.101 - he made one flight and thought it was so dangerous he refused to have anything more to do with it. A great character, a real airship hero. I learned a lot about the attitude of these 1920s flying men that afternoon.

Q.

How did you set about the writing?

A.

Well, I spent about six months reading everything I could lay my hands on about airships, the British Airship Program and the period in general. I had to get the period stuff right, as well as the facts. And the 1920s language was very important to me. I ended up reading a lot of Dornford Yates and Dorothy L Sayers to get the slang and the catch-phrases, and a lot of aviators' memoirs to get their frame of mind and view of the world.

Q.

It's an interesting period.

A.

An extraordinary period. The generation that survived the First World War felt they were living a charmed life; anything was possible, and personal danger just didn't enter the equation. They were not like us; it was a totally different mind-set. Imagine the prototype of a new aircraft today making it's first test flight with it's designers and chief executives of the company on board, or filling a passenger craft with highly explosive hydrogen. This wonderful, 'Roaring Twenties' view of life was a major factor in bringing about the disaster, of course.

Q.

Presumably, with a project this size, you have to plan everything out first, the plot and characters and so on.

A.

You certainly do, but the trouble was, I didn't do it, at least not initially. I deliberately started off trying to write the words and the music just as they came into my head, without any forward planning. The idea was to be more 'intuitive' and 'spontaneous', so I just wrote and wrote, without looking forwards or back, for a period of about six months. Then I thought I'd better see what I'd done. I found I'd got an hour-and-a-quarter of words and music, and I'd barely even started the story! It was horrible. I didn't know what to do. If I carried on the same way, the finished piece would be about five hours long. There was nothing for it but to bite the bullet and scrap the lot. I had to start again. I was able to reuse a lot of riffs and chord sequences, but the bulk

of the work was in the melody lines and the words, and they were a complete write-off.

Q.

How long did the whole writing process take?

A.

As opposed to the recording process? I suppose about two years at least, and that doesn't include a six months' gap when I had to relocate from Norfolk to the South Coast; that's to say, dismantle the studio, find a new place, do it up, move house and then rebuild the studio. It turned out to be six months to the day from switching off the equipment for the last time in Norfolk to my first day's work in the new studio.

Q.

What's your studio like?

A.

I live in a small bungalow on the edge of the South Downs. I had to find somewhere with very little traffic noise and not on a flight path, and bungalows are good for recording in because there's no one above or below to be blasted out by the noise. I have three rooms, kitchen and bathroom, and the biggest room is the studio, so basically I live in two rooms: a little cramped but I live alone so it suits me fine. As for equipment, the project was recorded on a Fosdex half-inch, sixteen-track recorder, so we're not talking high-end, big budget recording here. My set-up is about as basic as you can get and still achieve professional results.

Q.

I take it budget considerations were important.

A.

What budget? There was almost no money, and there was no record company or publisher, or producer, or management involved. If we hadn't got a small grant from the National Lottery, I don't know how we'd have finished it. In terms of budget, 'Curly's Airships' is the musical equivalent of 'The Blair Witch Project'.

Q.

Can you tell me something about the grant you got?

A.

It was from a scheme called A4E, 'Arts for Everyone', in which the Arts Council distributed money from the National Lottery for arts projects, with far less bureaucracy and red-tape than is normally the case. It did a great deal of good and enabled hundreds of small projects to get off the ground. We were very lucky. Naturally the powers-that-be soon put a stop to it, and small grants are now very difficult to get.

Q.

I take it that no one actually got paid.

A.

Out of the eighteen performers involved, only three were paid, and they weren't paid very much. I fed them though. It's one of Judge's Rules of Recording: 'Always feed the musicians.' If a good musician likes the music, they will do anything for you, but they have to eat.

Q.

'Curly's Airships' doesn't sound like a piece of low-budget recording. It's a very big, complex sound. It sounds as if it was recorded somewhere big and expensive.

A.

Thank you; I'm glad. You see, a low-budget production, be it film, album, whatever, doesn't get any points from the audience for being done on the cheap. The public doesn't make any allowances. The person who buys a copy of 'Curly' doesn't care how much it cost to make; the listener just wants it to be very, very good. This CD will be judged by the same standards as a production costing half-a-million to make.

Q.

That must be a bit scary.

A.

It doesn't bother me. This record is a classy piece of kit, made by professional artists working to professional standards. That's what makes something sound good, not the money you throw at it. I should make it clear though, that the sound quality of the final product is mainly due to the superb mixing and mastering, and of course, that definitely wasn't done by me, or in my studio. I had great musicians and all I had to do was to get good, solid recordings of what they did.

Q.

You use quite an eclectic line-up of instruments.

A.

I suppose so, but the instrumentation is pretty controlled; there's a logic to it. The main line-up is guitars, organs, bass and drums, with some saxophone touches; that's all.

Q.

No synthesisers?

A.

None, just organs, so the basic sound has a classic, and quite retro, flavour. The music isn't retro, just the sound. Then there are a couple of acoustic airship-shanties with accordion, banjo and mandolin; some tango sections with accordion and Latin percussion, and four marches for military band. There's also a piece for a 1920s dance band and some passages for sitar and tabla. That's about it.

Q.

How did you do the military band stuff?

A.

I did a deal with an arranger friend of mine, Michael Brand, a terrific composer and arranger, who wanted some help with a musical he was writing. I wrote a few lyrics for him, and, in return, he arranged my marches for a wind band and got it recorded. His company make wind band records.

Q.

And who are the Mystery Marching Band?

A.

What can I say? It's a mystery.

Q.

I can see how military marches would be appropriate for the story, and the dance band number, but how do Tango and Indian music fit in?

A.

The Tangos all relate to the character of Lord Thompson, as sung by Peter Hammill. Thompson is very debonair, very dashing and romantic, a great ladies' man. I see him as something of a lounge lizard, so I'm making a reference to the 1920s Tango dance craze by making all his music Tangos. It's not real Tango, of course, just a rock n'roll version - of a 1920s British dance band version - of real Tango.

Q.

And the Indian music?

A.

The R.101 was attempting to fly to India when it crashed, an almost impossible journey, given the condition of the ship. So each time Curly thinks about this very daunting prospect, we hear the Indian instruments.

Q.

Those passages sound very authentic.

A.

I know an excellent Dutch percussionist and tabla player called Rene van Commenee, so I contacted him and he organised his sitar partner, Tammo Heikens, to arrange my themes for the instruments. Rene was working in the music technology department of a large arts college in Utrecht and he arranged for me to give a couple of lectures there. In return, the college paid my fares and let me use their excellent recording studio to record these bits of music. They did a wonderful job, I think. It was just another one of the hoops I had to jump through in order to get the record made without any money to pay for it.

Q.

And the rest of the band?

A.

Basically all my friends have been press-ganged into helping me. I called in all available favours. Almost all the performers are chums of mine. Do you want me to run through them?

Q.

Please.

A.

The organist is Hugh Banton, who I've known since 1969, when Peter Hammill and I recruited him for the Van Der Graaf Generator. A phenomenal musician. He's one of the last of the classically trained, psychedelic-gothic Hammond organists who came through in the late Sixties: Keith Emerson, John Lord, Vincent Crane, that guy from Procol Harem, Ray Manzarek from the Doors - kind of. But I think Hugh was always the most radical. And the wonderful thing is that his music hasn't softened up or mellowed. He's now a successful organ builder; he designs and installs his own computer-driven church organs. He's a cultured man, very respectable, but underneath there's a wildman. Let him loose on some interesting music and he'll come up with extraordinary, sometimes quite shocking and scary stuff. An amazing person.

Q.

I noticed that he also does the airship engine sound effects on the organ.

A.

Yes. I spent ages tracking down authentic sounding period recordings for the engine noises; I even went to an air show with a DAT recorder to tape some old aircraft, but when Hugh heard my efforts, he said 'I can do better than that' and started experimenting with the organs. He came up with some great sounds, and I thought it was very appropriate to use instruments where possible, rather than sound effects. He created entirely different sounds for three airships, and makes them accelerate, go into reverse, idle and switch off.

John Ellis, the principal guitarist, had an equal impact on the work. I've known 'Fury', as his friends call him, for over fifteen years. He's one of my closest friends, but this is the first time we've done any serious work together. He's another master musician, the complete professional, but his punk roots are still there, and he plays with great energy and attitude. He works very fast and produces an enormous variety of work. I've never met anyone who knows more about so many different kinds of music. Both Fury and Hugh put in a vast amount of time on the project, and between them, they really defined the whole sound and character of the thing.

I suppose the next most significant performer is David Shaw-Parker. He's another one of these multi-talented blighters: a successful professional actor, a musician, singer, writer. I met him through his interest - one might say devotion - to the music of Peter Hammill. David wrote a marvellous book on the subject called 'The Lemming Chronicles'. He's very cosmopolitan and at home around Europe, and has developed this wonderful style of Mediterranean guitar. So he plays all the acoustic guitar parts on 'Curly' with this great Franco-Spanish, candlelit-bistro-style panache. He also turned out to be a cracking banjo player, so I took full advantage of that as well. Finally he sings some 'character parts' and is one of the actors who do the fragments of 'overheard' spoken dialogue. A knock-out talent.

Then we come to my four guest-star vocalists. Don't know who to start with. Alphabetical order! Arthur Brown sings the part of the Chairman of a Whitehall committee which keeps appearing, and he's also the tormented airship commander, 'Lucky Breeze'. This was really amazing for me: to work with a real idol of mine. At the end of the Sixties, I saw most of the great, classic performers of the time, including Hendrix, the Stones and so on, but I've never seen anything as completely mindblowing as the Crazy World of Arthur Brown. It really opened up a world of possibilities to me. To describe his show as theatrical is misleading; it makes him sound posey and posturing. Arthur is performance art. And what a singer! I got to know him quite recently when he moved back to this country from the States, and it was so nice to find that an idol need not have feet of clay. He's a wonderful man, very spiritual, a guru figure in many ways, and, best of all, his voice and energy are undiminished. When I told him about the project, he asked me if he could be in it. How lucky can you get? It's high time he was a world star all over again.

Pete Brown I knew of in the late Sixties as one of the country's leading young poets, and of course, as the lyricist for Cream. He took an interest in the Van Der Graaf, and we've been in touch intermittently ever since. He's also an excellent singer and all-round percussionist, and, these days, he's in demand as a record producer specialising in Blues. He's always taken a kindly view of my stuff, and when I realised that I would need some good, 'real' percussion, and that there were a few extra bits that needed singing by a different voice, he was the obvious choice. He added a completely different vibe to the tracks he played on. He's a big personality and it comes over in his music.

What can I say about Peter Hammill that hasn't been said before? I've learned an enormous amount from him, not only as a composer but about the way an artist should approach his work. I've known him for a very long time, and it was an obvious thing for me to ask him to sing on 'Curly'. He's pretty easy going about doing little

one-off projects and guest appearances, as long as the projects are what he would call 'honourable work'. They're probably a bit of light relief from his constant recording and touring. He's done more than fifty albums now, you know, and within those records, in my view, you can find some of the most profound, advanced and perfect music that has ever been made under the name of pop or rock. Anyhow, on 'Curly' he's just singing, and he takes the part of Lord Thompson, the villain, or perhaps the tragic hero, of the piece. He does it perfectly, of course, with that wonderful, saturnine voice of his.

Paul Roberts I've known for a much shorter time. I met him through John Ellis, of course, and their work with the Stranglers. Paul's a great rock singer and a really dynamic front man. The Stranglers live shows are very well done indeed; it's a tight band. Paul does a variety of bits and pieces on 'Curly', including the important big-ballad 'It's the Silence that Kills You', which he does solo and then again, later, as a duet with Arthur Brown. Good combination! There's another bit where he had to do some singing in a 'helium voice', you know, a very high, munchkin voice, in a section about the dangers of inhaling the gas these airships were filled with. Rather than fake it electronically, we decided to do it for real, so the studio ceiling was covered with gas balloons for him to inhale. By the time we got it done, he was passing out on the floor. He's a professional.

I should also say something about David Jackson, the saxophonist, who I've known since 1970. He was in a band I had after leaving Van Der Graaf Generator, and when my band broke up, he joined VDGG. On 'Curly' there was always going to be a horn or woodwind part doing odd lines throughout the piece, and I'm delighted that David was able to do it. Of course he's a great improvising musician, and this project doesn't give him much scope to cut loose, but his sound is unique; it couldn't be anyone else playing. Only really fine sax players develop a unique voice. On one track he recreates the sound of the entire sax section of a 1920s dance band to perfection. He also loves playing penny-whistle and he's very much to the fore in the shanties.

Q.

What about the other main voice?

A.

You mean our Tenor. One of the original sounds I had in my head at the very beginning of the project was a classical tenor voice. I could hear this high, rather unearthly, male voice in various different contexts: a very particular kind of voice, not an operatic tenor - frankly, I dislike that bellowing and braying intensely - it had to be a church voice. They call it a 'soft tenor' but to me it's a different animal. The problem was that the worlds of choristers and of rock n'roll don't interface very often, and it was some while before I was able to find a singer who was good enough to do the stuff I'd written, which is not easy to sing, and who would have some sympathy and understanding of what we were trying to do. I think we did very well to find Paul Thompson. At the time, he was principal tenor with the choir of Christ Church College, Oxford, and he's now doing post-graduate studies at the Royal College of Music.

I've told you about the Dutch sitar and tabla players, but not about the accordionist. His name's Joe Hinchliff, and he's with a band from Brighton called 'Tragic Roundabout' who do music from Eastern Europe, the Balkans and the Middle East: 'Klesmer' music and that sort of thing. I was in Lewes with Arthur and we saw them busking. It's great get-up-and-dance stuff, a terrific band. So Joe was able to add some authentic gypsy flavours to the tangos and some folk-roots credibility to the shanties.

Rikki Patten is another Brighton musician; he plays quite a lot for Arthur Brown. He's really talented at guitar and organ, but on 'Curly', he has a very specific role as Supplementary Guitarist. My tunes, my vocal melody lines, are pretty complicated in places, and they use quite a lot of unusual notes, so I like to double the more surprising bits with another instrument. It makes the tunes easier to listen to and follow. So once the principal recording was finished for the whole thing, I went through

it and identified the places where the tunes needed a bit of extra help. Hugh added some of these phrases on organ, but others would sound better on guitar. John Ellis was, by this time, up to his neck in other projects, so I recruited Rikki for the job. He plays a Gibson, while Fury uses a Fender-type guitar, and, as any guitarist will tell you, they make completely different sorts of sounds, so this added a nice extra dimension. Rikki brought a lot of individual style to this very unpromising job, and I hope to work with him again in a more substantial way.

Where are we now on the list? Yes, Ian Fordham on Bass Guitar. I did most of the bass lines myself, with sampled sounds, but there were a few tracks where I couldn't get it just right, so my old chum Ian, who I've known since the mid-Seventies when he played bass in my group 'The Imperial Storm Band', came in. In fact he'd already devised an excellent bass part for one track, because the tune started life years ago as a prospective theme tune for the TV show 'Spitting Image'.

Q.

Which track was that?

A.

Not telling. Guess. Oh yes, and he plays Double Bass for the 'Hughie Banton's Mayfair Aviators' track.

There are three remaining performers, all professional actors. Nick Lucas is involved in the little pieces of 'overheard' control cabin dialogue, and he also sings as a member of the awful Committee. I've known Nick since I was thirteen! And he brought his chum Mike Bell to help out. I had an actors' day at the studio, with mics set up in different rooms and people running about to get the effect of movement. The only woman performer we have is Gwendolyn Gray, a most remarkable lady whose stage career started in the 1930s. She was a leading lady throughout the Forties, and did some of the earliest British TV commercials, amongst other things. She's been a close friend of mine since I wrote a musical about her late husband about twenty-five years ago.



Q.

What was that?

A.

'The Kibbo Kift', written with Maxwell Hutchinson. Gwen is now almost ninety and was in her late 80s when she recorded the part of the Medium for me. She's now partially sighted, so when we did the recording, I wrote out her lines for her on huge sheets of card. She was brilliant, I think: very convincing.

Q.

Was it a deliberate decision, not to have any other women in the project?

A.

Good Lord no! But inescapably, the story is about life in the Services in the 1920s and, regrettably, women at that time were not directly involved in the events we're dealing with. Of course it would have been extremely interesting to explore the domestic and romantic lives of more of the characters, but I think it would have been wrong to put in a number for Curly's wife Suzie, for example, or Lord Thompson's exotic mistress, just for the sake of having more of a female presence. I was cutting, cutting, cutting all the time, and it's still a long piece. There just wasn't the space.

Q.

So once you had your band and your singers, how did you organise the recording?

A.

As I've already said, it was a long drawn-out process. Once I'd got through to the end from the writing point of view, I edited together a super-rough demo of the whole thing, with very simple accompaniment and my voice singing everything, just to see how it worked and whether all the separate bits joined up properly. As a result of that, I made a few changes and amendments, but, surprisingly, I found I didn't have to do any major rewrites. Then I divided up the music into sections for recording purposes. These aren't the track divisions on the finished CDs; they're smaller sections, and each one was recorded separately. In one of those spooky coincidences, it turns out that there were exactly one hundred and one of these.

Q.

As in R.101...Now, the CDs are divided into 'Chapters' and also tracks. What is the thinking behind that?

A.

The fifteen Chapters are the main divisions of the story, like the chapters in a book, hence the name. They relate to the story rather than the music. If you didn't want to listen to the whole work, then one or more consecutive Chapters would make a logical chunk to hear. The tracks, on the other hand, divide along musical lines, each track tends to make sense as a piece of music; although with my style of writing, most tracks are made up of several contrasting fragments. Now, how technical do you want me to be? Can I talk nerdy?

Q.

Be my guest. We are on the Internet after all.

A.

OK. Here comes the science. Each of these mini-tracks, which might be anywhere from 30 seconds long to three or four minutes, started life as a piece of half-inch, 16 track recording tape with a strip of SMPTE time code on one track. My guide tracks were composed on an Atari computer sequencer, using simple sampled sounds from my old Emax sampler. These covered all the basic guitar and organ parts as I thought they would be, and I recorded these, one at a time, to tape, using the time code off tape to drive the sequencer. Then I'd devise the bass lines and the drum parts using a Peavy Spectrum Bass module and an E-mu ProCussion box of sampled drum sounds.

Q.

The drums sound very realistic, not like a sequencer.

A.

Nice of you to say so. It's quite possible to achieve a very realistic drum track, but it takes an awful lot of button-pushing. It's very time consuming, and of course you have to be a drummer, even a bad one like me. Modern dance music is built on the shortcomings and limitations of drum machines, and of course exploits their considerable advantages, but if you want to create the sound of a real drummer playing a real drum kit, you have to put in a lot of work. OK, so the bass and drum parts I've just done, are intended to be the finished article, but I just record them roughly, as a guide.

Q.

Why is that?

A.

Because to record the drums onto tape properly would take up around eight tracks, and the bass would use up another two, and I haven't even started on the guitars or organs or vocals. So for this reason, the bass and drums never go onto the finished multitrack tape at all; they are added at the mixing stage. Right, so then I do some rough vocals, and then John Ellis would come down and the real recording could begin. He'd stay for a couple of days, and we'd work through fifteen or so of these little pieces. I'd have the chord sequence written out; he'd listen to the piece and interpret what I'd done. He might come up with several different ideas which I would never have thought of in a hundred years. Most of the rock-based pieces had several different guitar parts, but we worked very quickly, recording over the top of my rough tracks. John used just one guitar, a Fender Strat clone, and a Q-verb GT effects processor which went straight into the desk and onto tape, mostly without any further processing. He is an excellent programmer and would create new effects with the Q-verb, on the fly, for every track.

Q.

What about the organ?

A.

We had to be quite innovative about this. Hugh lives in the North of England, and I'm on the South Coast, and it would have been quite impractical for him to have to bring these large instruments a very long way for the dozens of recording sessions it would take to record his stuff. However, he has a Session-8 hard disk recording system of his own, so we decided to use that. Once the guitar tracks were done for a worthwhile number of short pieces, I would do a rough, mono mix of them onto the Left hand track of a DAT digital cassette tape, with their bits of time code going down from my multitrack master tape onto the Right hand side of the DAT. I'd send this to Hugh in the post, along with chord sheets and cassettes of my rough ideas, and he would transfer the DAT tape to two tracks of his Session-8. He could then work at leisure, working out and recording his own parts onto the remaining tracks, and sending me cassettes of what he'd done, for me to listen to.

Finally, when we had a worthwhile amount of material covered, I would put the 16-track in the car - which was quite a job in itself; I had to install a block-and-tackle to hoist it into its box, and ramps to get it out of the house - and take it up to Hugh's place. Then we'd link my machine to his, to make his Session-8 run under the control of the time code on my master tapes, and we could transfer Hugh's organ tracks onto my 16-track, in sync with the guitars and everything else. That was the idea; in fact we had problems with the synchronisation, which tended to drift out on the longer pieces. Hardly surprising really; regulating a computer with an old-fashioned tape recorder is like trying to control an electric clock with a steam-engine. Still, it all worked eventually. I had to make eight or so visits, of a couple of days each, to get the job done. This was, in fact, a very agreeable way for Hugh to work, as he could experiment far more without me breathing down his neck, and I think the organ work is stunning.

Q.

Do you like to keep a firm control over everything?

A.

In some respects, yes, I'm a control freak. I know when it's right, and I know when it's wrong, and when it's wrong, it has to be put right. But otherwise, I hope I'm pretty open to the moment and to other people's ideas. There's no point in having great musicians if you don't give them the space to do their thing. Far more often than not, they'll come up with something better than you originally had in mind. Of course, it depends on the material. I try very hard to write music with strong bones: real chord sequences that go somewhere, riffs that stick in the mind, big tunes - even if I don't always succeed. And if music has strong bones, it will take any amount of weirdness

or wildness or anarchistic creativity that a musician might throw at it.

Q.

Would it have been better to have everyone working and recording together at the same time?

A.

Possibly, but I rather doubt it. That situation, of a band recording everything at the same time in the same room, doesn't happen as often as you might think. And it usually ends up with each musician going back and re-recording their parts again, separately. But it is true that this project was done in a particularly fragmented way. Hugh and John, in fact, never met during the entire recording process!

Q.

Was it hard to keep motivated for such a long time?

A.

Motivation isn't really a problem for me; once I get my teeth into something, I don't let go. I'm very tenacious. But it was very exhausting, very demanding. I won't do anything so big again without outside support. There were some major setbacks to deal with as well. I managed to do the classic computer goof of not backing-up my work often enough. I filled a floppy disk with drum and bass parts, about three months' work, and thought I'd better back it up. Got out a fresh disk to format, and put the wrong disk in the machine and re-formatted my original disk! All gone. No excuse; as my girlfriend sometimes has to point out, I can be a complete plonker. Just had to go back and do it all again. Still, I'll never make that mistake again.

On another occasion, I was held up for weeks because I had to give up my best microphone. I'd been using a beautiful old 1950s RCA ribbon mic, the kind Elvis Presley used, which I'd been lent years before. Then, in the middle of recording my finished vocals, I got an urgent call to say that the owner needed it back double-quick. Good mics are not cheap, and I had to sell my beloved Hammond organ to buy a replacement. And of course the Hammond had to be serviced and advertised before it could eventually be sold etc. etc. Still, when I got low, I found that listening to what we'd done soon cheered me up.

Q.

Are you still pleased with it?

A.

To be honest, I'd have to say yes. It still gives me a buzz. But who knows, I could be deluded.

Q.

Not all the recording took place in a studio, did it?

A.

No. You mean the location recordings?

Q.

Yes. What was the idea behind recording at the churches and the hanger?

A.

This is what I call the Conceptual Art element of the project. I thought it would be fun to try and record some bits of music at places that are associated with particular parts

of the story. So, for one section that takes place the night before the R.101 starts its final flight, we recorded the organ part in Cardington parish church, which was the local church for the Airship Works. You can see the airship sheds from there, and the mass grave of the R.101's passengers and crew is in the churchyard. Members of the crew worshiped there, and the organ is the same instrument that was in use at the time. We use it on a setting of the 'Ave Maria', which seems appropriate.

Then we had a dramatic organ solo which happens as the R.101 is flying low over Beauvais Cathedral, shortly before the crash. So Hugh and I went to Beauvais and recorded the solo on the gigantic cathedral organ in this astonishing building. We combined this mission with a pilgrimage to the crash site and the huge and impressive memorial, put up by the French. We also visited the splendidly eccentric R.101 Museum in the town.

The third location we used was the R.101's shed at Cardington. This is still there, though pretty shabby today, and mind-bogglingly huge. Nothing gives a better idea of the size of these airships, particularly when you realise that the R.101 fitted into the shed with only six feet to spare at either end. There's a whole section of the piece that describes Curly's reactions when he first sees the half-finished airship inside the shed, and this section features sound effects of the thing being built, with drills and riveters banging away, and a grand guitar solo. These were already recorded on tape, and so I made a cassette tape of the construction sound effects and another one of John's guitar solo: just his guitar, nothing else. Then we took a cassette player and a battery-powered guitar amp up to Cardington, and played these tapes loudly in the middle of the shed. We recorded the amazing echoes and reverberation on a portable DAT recorder, and at the mixing stage, these were mixed with the original sounds. The shed was in use at that time as a warehouse, full of plastic dustbins, and we only got in there by the good offices of Den Burchmore of the Airship Heritage Trust. The guys working there kindly turned off their fork-lift trucks for five minutes while we scurried about the alleyways between huge piles of dustbins trying to catch these sounds.

There were a few other minor examples of Conceptual mucking about. For example, there's a passage where John was trying to make the sound of an airship breaking up in flight. He needed a piece of rough metal to scrape over his guitar strings so we used a piece of broken airship I happen to have. I thought it was worth going to all this trouble just for the hell of it, just to say we'd done it, not so much for the acoustic results that I thought we were likely to get, but I was amazed at what a difference they make. The Cardington church organ sounds delightfully English and authentic, while the Beauvais recording is astonishing. We did it on a cassette recorder, because we didn't have a DAT recorder available, but the sound is fantastic, quite unlike anything else on the record. Well worth all the effort. As for the stuff we did in the airship shed, I would have thought that, with modern digital-echo and reverb processors being available, our recordings of the ambience in there would have been redundant, but these passages have a unique quality of sound which we couldn't have achieved otherwise. A lot is down to David Lord's skill during the mix, of course.

Q.

How was the mixing done?

A.

David Lord mixed my last CD, 'Dome of Discovery', and he seems to have a weakness for difficult and not very profitable projects. I know him because his studio and Peter Hammill's studio share the same building. He's an extraordinary man, a serious classical musician and composer, turned rock'n'roll producer. Delightful company, and effortlessly brilliant at what he does. His contribution to 'Curly's Airships' was absolutely crucial; the quality of the finished sound is down, very much, to his work.

For the mixing, I had to take my 16-track, my computer and my sound modules down to Bath and transfer all sixteen tracks of my master-tapes onto David's large array of

ADAT digital recorders. Then, as we mixed each individual 'fragment' or mini-track of music, the time code, now safely on David's system, could control my computer which, in turn, was driving my sound modules and playing the drum and bass parts in real time, as the mix happened. This meant that, if my precious drum and bass stuff wasn't up to scratch, David could oh-so-diplomatically suggest an alternative, and the parts could be changed in my computer's sequencer there and then. The finished mixes were transferred onto David's hard-disk editing system, and stitched together into the tracks as you hear them. I had to schlep all my gear up and down to Bath about eight times between March 1999 and January 2000, thirteen weeks work in all. In between stays in Bath, I was recording my finished vocals, which I find is a wretched job. I love singing, but recording vocals is hell when you have to do all your own button pushing at the same time as well. Of course the vocals on 'Curly' made the mixing a very delicate job.

Q.

Why, particularly?

A.

Well, because a songstory is a narrative form, it's absolutely essential that all the words can be heard and understood first time through. With a normal song, you can afford to set the vocals back a little, make them sound good with echo and reverb, and maybe you miss a few words the first time you hear it. That's ok, because it usually doesn't go on too long and, if you want to catch all the lyrics, you can listen again carefully. It can be interesting and intriguing to have the voice a bit indistinct. But a songstory goes on too long to be forever straining to follow the words. Understanding the narrative has to be effortless; otherwise the listener will eventually lose interest. That's what I believe, anyway. So David had to tread a narrow path between making the voices sound clear and making the voices sound good.



Q.

What's your final verdict on the project?

A.

The verdict should come from a jury not a Judge. What can I say? I don't think there's anything else like it - not that I know of, anyway - but the fact that something's unique doesn't necessarily mean that it's any good. I think I've done something that hasn't been done before, but I don't know if I've done it well, or even whether the something I've done was worth doing in the first place. I hope people will tell me.

For another interview with Judge conducted by Sean Kelly and David Scoffield, in September 1995, see [The Judge Smith Interview](#).

Join The **Q.**

If you have other questions about **Curly's Airships** for Judge, please post them on the [Ship's Log](#) and he will do his best to answer them there.

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The Way Ahead

Last updated

The independent release of Curly's Airships as a double CD marks the end of the first stage of the project only.

From its outset in 1993, when Judge began his detailed research on the subject, it has always been intended that Curly's Airships would have a second life as a live one-man show, a performance piece using costume, lights, stage set and projected images, to be presented in seated Theatre spaces (as opposed to music venues).

This staged performance, with the composer himself as Flight Lieutenant Curly McCloud, will use the musical backing tracks of the CDs to accompany Judge's live vocals, and a mix of the music without Curly's voice has been prepared as a soundtrack for the show.

In this way, a compact, cost-effective and practical production will be possible and Judge hopes to tour this live show as soon as possible in the numerous small and medium-sized theatres that make up the touring circuit, both at home and abroad.

We also believe that the work, whether in full or in extracts, would translate with great ease to TV or video. This type of 'sung-to-camera' vocal music lends itself to all manner of creative video production techniques, and there a wealth of period film and photographic material available.

This same combination of music, directly related visual images and fascinating documentary material also makes Curly's Airships a perfect project for a DVD release.

Our progress towards these goals are shown in the following news updates:

4th April 2004

Judge Smith & The Young Offenders to play Komedia, Brighton

See Judge live in Brighton.

[Where? When? How Much?](#)

8th September 2003

Judge Smith & The Young Offenders to play Pirate Jenny's, London in October

On the road again, Judge and the band will be performing a couple of numbers from Curly's Airships.

[More...](#)

29th November 2002

Judge Live in Lewes

Read about Judge's first live gig for 10 years, appearing on a bill with Arthur Brown and accompanied by Rikki Patten. And haven't we seen that suit before?

[More...](#)

12th October 2000

Curly's Airship r.100 Found in France

One of the two model airships released at the launch of Curly's Airships has been found and the free copy of the album claimed.

[See the Report](#)

5th October 2000

Curly's Airships Released

Seven years after the project commenced, Curly's Airships is finally launched.

[See the Launch Report](#)

July 1997

Radio 4 - The Afternoon Shift

An item about Curly's Airships, featuring Judge Smith, appeared on the **Afternoon Shift** on [BBC Radio 4](#) in early July 1997, twinned with an item about the new airship being built at the Zeppelin works in Germany.

[See the Transcript.](#)

July 1997

HTV - Frieze Frame

A quarter-of-an-hour documentary about the project was shown on H.T.V. (UK West Country TV region) on Thursday, July 10th 1997 at 11.30 PM in the arts series **FRIEZE FRAME**.

Directed by Morris Baker and made by Gwynhelek Productions Ltd. (of Rosudgeon, Penzance, Cornwall, TR20 9DA, UK.), the film features both studio and dramatised performances from Judge Smith, Peter Hammill and Arthur Brown, with a special appearance by Lene Lovich.

[See the Transcript.](#)

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Up Ships! Curly's Airships Launched on October 5th 2000

At mid-day on Thursday 5 October 2000, on a cliff top near Hastings, Sussex, in clear bright sunshine and a stiff breeze, the seventieth anniversary of the R.101 airship disaster was marked in a ceremony by some of the creators of Curly's Airships including Judge Smith, John Ellis, Ian Fordham and Nick Lucas supported by ground crew and an audience of invited guests and the press. The event also marked the official launch of the Curly's Airships CD set and the new web site.



Press and invited guests gather for the launch at Cliff End, overlooking Haddock Gap, through which the R.101 passed, crossing the south coast of England on her maiden voyage.

The cliff top location, overlooking the village of Fairlight marks the exact point at which the R.101 crossed the English coast on its maiden voyage to India, the voyage that was to end only a few hours later when the stricken craft crash landed on a hillside at Beauvais, Northern France and was destroyed by fire, killing all but six of the fifty-four men on board.



Remembering the R.101 Disaster

Judge, wearing the full period uniform of an officer of the Imperial Airship Service, made a short speech about the anniversary and the bravery of the men involved, many of whom had serious misgivings about the likely success of the flight. A minute's silence was observed in memory of those killed in the disaster.

With the formalities over, the festivities began. Two model airships, 1.2m (4ft) long and dubbed r.100 and r.101, each bearing the web-site address emblazoned along the hull, were duly

christened with champagne, and toasted by the assembled throng. Each airship carried a voucher for a free copy of Curly's Airships in the clear plastic gondola, slung below the silver hull.



r.101 and r.100 being readied for launch. In another of those odd co-incidences, the ground crew discovered that while r.100 maintained gas pressure throughout the proceedings, r.101 was found to be losing gas at it's mooring and all spare ballast had to be ditched just before launch.

To the accompaniment of an appropriate track from the audio CD, the ground crew readied the two craft for launch, trimming the ballast and checking the payloads. At the command "Let Go" the ground crew released the mooring lines and the two ships rose majestically into the air and were carried out to sea on the breeze in the direction of France.



Up Ships!

As well as being most appropriate, this southerly flight was unusual, as the prevailing winds on this part of the South Coast normally blow in from the sea.



The two model airships, r.100 and r.101 (top and middle-right in the picture) head out to sea towards France.

Biscuits in the shape of the R.101, iced in silver, were passed around with the champagne, while interviews with the performers took place before we repaired to The Cove at Fairlight for an excellent pub lunch.

277 feet



Refreshments!

Doomed airship inspires rocker's flight of fancy



▲ Judge Smith as Curly McLeod

FAIRLIGHT'S place in aviation history helped earn it an unlikely place in rock music history last week.

Haddock Cup at Fairlight was the last point on British soil the R101 airship flew over on its maiden flight, which ended in tragedy when it crashed in France, killing 48 people.

So what better place to launch a rock album about the disaster, 70 years to the day after the crash happened?

Curly's Airships is the brainchild of Judge Smith, a founder member of cult '60s and '70s band Van De Graaf Generator, who lives in Pelegate.

The 26-track, two-hour-20-minute album features 18 performers and was seven years in the making. It tells the tale of fictional airship captain Curly McLeod and his part in the tragedy.

Musicians, actors and the media gathered on the cliffs at Fairlight last Thursday for the album launch. A minute's silence was observed in memory of the 48 who lost their lives, and two model airships were launched, flying out over the sea.

The maiden voyage of the 770ft

by
JAMES CLARKE

long and 150ft tall airship was due to take it to India via Egypt. At 9.38pm on the night of October 4 1930 the vessel passed low over Fairlight, fighting heavy wind and rain, already leaking air and with one failed engine.

Hours later it crashed into a hillside near Beauvais and exploded, killing 48 of the 54 people on board, including Lord Thomson, minister for air.

So why has Judge Smith made an album about the R101?

He explained: "I love airships. They are the most surreal form of transport ever invented. They remind me of people's dreams and aspirations. Our dreams are big and beautiful and they take us up and out of the everyday world into the sky and, like dreams, airships are expensive, impractical, fragile and sometimes dangerous. It's a bit of a metaphor."

Among artists featured on Curly's



▲ The R101 before its first - and last - voyage. A surreal form of transport, says rock musician Judge Smith

Airships are Arthur Brown, the man behind the Crazy World of Arthur Brown, John Ellis, ex-guitarist with The Stranglers, Peter Gabriel, and three of Judge's former Van De Graaf colleagues.

The album has been produced independently with no major funding other

than a small National Lottery Arts Council grant. It will be on sale from the end of October, priced £19.95. While it will appear in shops, the best place to order it from at the moment - and read about the project - is on the website www.curlyairships.com

The Launch as reported in the local press

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Curly's Airship r.100 Found in France

The first of the two model airships, r.100 and r.101, which were [launched on October 5th 2000](#) from the coast near Hastings, England, has been found. r.100 was recovered from a tree in the garden of M. Cadyck, in Watten, near St. Omer in France on the morning of October 6th, 2000.

The airship, which carried a voucher for a free copy of **Curly's Airships** in a watertight gondola slung beneath its belly, had flown some 110 km (70 miles) due east from its launch point.

M. Cadyck retrieved the deflated envelope of the airship from his tree and found the voucher in the gondola. No doubt somewhat bemused, he filled in the details of the find and posted the voucher off to us. We received it this morning (October 12th) and have written to him to confirm that the first copy of **Curly's Airships** to be sent out will be his.



The model airships r.100 (the dark object, top centre) and r.101 (the bright object bottom centre) after their launch from Fairlight, east of Hastings, England at midday 5th October 2000.

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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

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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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Reviews From The Media

December 2001

MOJO - <http://www.mojo4music.com/>

Remarkable account of the R.101 airship disaster in 1930, featuring Arthur Brown, Peter Hammill, Hugh Banton and 15 others.

An original member of Van Der Graaf Generator, (Chris) Judge Smith describes Curly's Airships as a "songstory". Not quite a rock opera, not exactly a musical, it tells of Britain's doomed attempts to master air travel following World War One. Lyricist and composer Smith sings the part of Curly McLeod, an air service officer recounting the tragic tale of the R. 101 from his grave. Across 2-CDs and 140 minutes, the music embraces rock, old-time dancehall and eerie atmospherics, with repeated passages identifying key characters' appearances. A six-year project aided by a Lottery grant, Curly's Airships is closer to Radio 3 than 1, but never lets its erudition smother its elegant way with language and melody.

David Cavanagh

May 2001

LUNAKAFÉ - the fullmoonthly e-zine! <http://www.fuzzlogic.com/lunakafe/>

This double CD - 144 minutes long and including two thick booklets of lyrics and information - was launched about six moons ago, but it's a one-of-a-kind album that needs time and deserves a review. It tells the true and extraordinary story of the ups and downs (literally) of British airship history, focusing on a grandiose plan to link the colonies of the empire with a fleet of airships. The dream culminated with the destruction of the giant R.101, the world's largest airship, on its maiden voyage to India in 1930.

You might have heard of Mr. Smith earlier. He wrote the lyrics/libretto for the Usher opera that was on our Full Moon 42 menu. In his teens he gave the name to and co-founded Van der Graaf Generator (VdGG) along with Peter Hammill, check out the VdGG Boxed story at the Full Moon 51 menu. He left the band at the time their first single was released in early 1969. Since then he has been involved in other rock, pub, punk and experimental bands, released a couple of CDs, written a Latin mass, operas and stage musicals off Shaftesbury Avenue and songs performed by Peter Hammill and Lene Lovich. Curly's Airships has been his main musical occupation since 1993.

The story is told by Flight Lieutenant George 'Curly' McLeod, a fictional character with his own views, but based on the historical facts. As Judge Smith puts it in his notes: 'Despite his thoroughly one-sided view of events, I have a sneaking and quite unjustifiable suspicion that this just might be - pretty much - the way it was.' To make matters even more complicated, it's not Curly as such who speaks, but his ghost, through an old lady, a medium. Actually, after the final catastrophe that killed nearly 50 people (only six survived), a celebrated spiritualist medium received lengthy messages from deceased crew members who revealed information no one else could have known.

Judge calls his work a songstory, because most of the story is told/sung by one person, as opposed to an opera, rock opera or musical. Judge sings the part of Curly himself and plays most of the drums and bass tracks. An impressive gang of 60s/70s/80s musical celebrities helps him out along with a host of lesser-known names. Hugh Banton takes care of all the organ parts throughout the album, both modern and old ones - the latter recorded in a church and a cathedral near the sites where the story took place. This is his first major

recording project, I believe, since he left VdGG in 1976. John Ellis - guitarist and E-bow master of the Vibrators, Stranglers and Peter Hammill and his K Group - is also contributing throughout the album. David Jackson (saxes and flutes) also of VdGG plays on several tracks as does Pete Brown (percussion and vocals; Cream lyricist and leader of Battered Ornaments and Piblokto). Although Curly is the story teller, he remembers or imagines statements of other persons of the story, sung by Peter Hammill, Arthur Brown (the King of Hellfire of the Crazy World and Kingdom Come, you know), Paul Roberts (Stranglers) and others. Brown and Hammill impersonate an incompetent governmental bureaucrat and an ambitious minister of air, respectively, who manage to ruin the project by their demands for safety and to keep the work schedule. [So if they value their jobs, They had better deliver' - heard that one before, history seems to repeat itself, eh?]

The inclusion of the medium is a clever move. The voice of the actress Gwendolyn Gray in her late 80s that transforms into Curly's/Judge's and the ticking of an old clock effectively take the listener back to the times after the first world war. This is strengthened by period slang in the lyrics (explained in one of the booklets). Also the music is interspersed by military marches, air (as opposed to sea) shanties and tango sections of the merry 1920s.

A couple of tracks have sitars, tamburas etc. at the thought of flying away to India. The rest of the music is harder to characterise. John Ellis tells on his homepage that 'It is one of the most remarkable pieces of music I have ever had the pleasure of being involved with'. True! It is mostly rock based, but not in the traditional form. There are hardly any conventional songs - only short segments, no rhyming lyrics, verses or choruses. Instead there are 27 musical themes that is repeated at least once. But the work includes several other themes. The story is divided into 26 tracks arranged in 15 chapters. I guess the music is based on the words and not vice versa. A few times the words seem to be all that matters with hardly any tune at all. Also there are pieces of spoken dialogue between airship crew members and great airship sound effects created by Banton's organs (no synthesizers!) and the guitars of Ellis; to make it sound like a sort of radio play in between. But overall, it's the words and music combined that matter.

Someone compared the music to Zappa's more complex works. I don't think so, though maybe that's as close as we can get. The way the music describes the work inside the giant airship sheds, the pompous debates in governmental committees, Curly's eagerness to fly, the lightness of the airship flying through and above the clouds, the hazards of navigating the ship through rain and thunder storms etc. is very appropriate. Hugh Banton and John Ellis in particular must have put a lot of time and enthusiasm into the project. And a challenge it must have been with hardly any repetitions and music adapted to the words. Judge sings better than ever and really distinct, you can hardly misunderstand any word he is singing, as I usually tend to do. The other participants' efforts must not be forgotten. But their contributions are mere fill-ins compared to Judge's Banton's and Ellis' formidable efforts.

Forget all your prejudices concerning concept albums and rock operas. Curly's Airships is a unique work of long durability created by a madman. Well, at least you have to be pretty mad to dedicate several years of your life to the studies required, drag your home recording equipment up and down the country to record it and - when finally finished - release the album on your own label in a first edition of 1,000 copies only. It certainly has nothing to do with fame or fortune! You'll find everything you need to know about the project, sound samples, how to order the album and even more at the specially designed and great Curly's Airships home page.

JP

April 2001

Dirigible - The Journal of the Airship Heritage Trust. <http://www.airshipsonline.com/>

For years we have tried to put across the enormity, brilliance, heroism and fascination of the Imperial Airship Service; yes, and the incompetence, stupidity, and arrogance that went with it. We have been largely constrained in two dimensions: inadequate words, poignant sepia images, scraps of jerky newsreel. Then someone comes along with an idea so off-the-beam

and radical as to appear laughable: that story told through the medium of rock music.

Judge Smith is that someone, and has long regarded rock music as an artform. With his roots in the Sixties and influences such as Bowie, Zappa, Peter Hammill and the Crazy World of Arthur Brown upon him, Judge's songs have helped carve something of a niche of his own. Airships have always been part of his life too. He modestly describes himself as an 'airship dilettante' who, at 13, met Barnes Wallis in that famous Brooklands office: the great man was rather irritated that the boy wanted to know about airships rather than the hypersonic flight then occupying his fertile brain. Twenty years ago he spent an afternoon with Capt George Meager of R100 and learned much about the attitudes of the 20s flying men.

The result of this heady mix is a 2 CD 'song-story' lasting over two hours which has been six years in the making. It is probably the largest and most ambitious single piece of rock music that has ever been recorded. But there are so many other musical influences - classical, shanties, 20s dance bands and Indian ragas - that it defies any specific categorisation. Our guide is a fictitious airshipman, Curly McCloud (Judge himself), as he traces his career from Pulham in 1919 to his death at Allonne (and beyond). He has a robust sense of humour with a sardonic edge - very British - and interacts with great events accordingly. The libretto which brings Curly to life is virtually faultless and very, very clever: it is presented in one of the two highly informative booklets with the CDs. This striking combination of poetry, music and Curly's humanity, flings open a door on our two-dimensional world, flooding it with vivid, surreal colour which, once experienced, is not easily forgotten. There is much humour and great beauty, but be warned that the section depicting the death-throes of R101 has literally left many listeners rigid with horror (the music at this point was actually recorded on the organ of Beauvais Cathedral); and the muffled drum procession which follows is absolutely heartbreaking - it recalls Vaughan William's 'last post' in the Pastoral Symphony of 1920, the 'bugles calling them from sad shires'. Such is the scope of the work.

Not all the music will appeal to everyone, but there are visionary moments which are almost painful in their beauty. Here is that mystical relationship which those who 'fly by the grace of the sky' have with the elements, each voyage 'an intimate dialogue with the wind and sun', of 'theoretical winds in a paper sky'. Yet here too is cosy, rose-hued inter-war Britain - coloured glass in the front door, musty smells in the parlour, and a new Bull-nosed Morris in the motor house 'while the 1920s rattled past outside...'

There is a fascinating website - www.curlysairships.com - telling the story of the work, together with lots of other information making it one of the best 'period' airship websites going.

Nick Walmsley

March 2001

Airship - The Journal of the Airship Association. <http://www.airship.demon.co.uk/>

These CDs are certainly different - one should perhaps best describe them as unique. By using words and rock music, they tell the story, as truly as possible, of the early rigid airships from the 1924 Imperial Airship Scheme through to the R 101 and its tragic loss on its maiden voyage to India in 1930. The sound of the engines, the commands when an airship is withdrawn from its hangar, on take-off, in flight etc. are as authentic as you could hope for, whilst the music fairly shakes you at times and adds to the emotion experienced by both those early pioneers and the listener.

The Songstory took six years to make. When you hear it you can tell why. It has been researched well and is a welcome addition to anyone's bookshelf.

Arnold WL Nayler

February 2001

Traverses. <http://www.multimania.com/traversesmag>

Fin 1967, Chris Judge SMITH avait proposé, pour le groupe qu'il venait de former avec Nick

PEARNE et Peter HAMMILL, toute une liste de noms inavouables et c'est VAN DER GRAAF GENERATOR qui a été retenu. Ne vous plaignez pas, le groupe aurait très bien pu s'appeler «Zeiss Manifold and The Shrieking Plasma Exudation» !!

SMITH n'est resté que peu de temps dans VDGG puisqu'il a fait ses valises en novembre 1968, non sans avoir enregistré avec le groupe un 45T. (People You Were Going to/Firebrand) et une trentaine de chansons avec Peter HAMMILL. Certaines d'entre elles seront réenregistrées par ce dernier (Imperial Zeppelin, Viking, Time For a Change, Been Alone so Long...) ou ressurgiront plus tard sur le premier CD de Judge SMITH, Democrazy (Oedipus Recs).

Aussi, même si le passage de Judge au sein de VDGG s'apparente à celui de l'éclair (il réapparaîtra dans le groupe le temps d'un morceau prodigieusement décalé, An Epidemic of Father Christmases, enregistré à la BBC en 1971), son nom est intimement lié à l'histoire du «Generator» et le personnage fait partie de la famille. Du reste, il écrira le libretto de l'opéra hammillien The Fall of The House of Usher...

Il faudra attendre 1994 pour voir apparaître le premier véritable album de Judge SMITH, Dome of Discovery (Oedipus Recs), où le chanteur-compositeur, accompagné entre autres de quatre cuivres, quatre violoncelles, une chorale et une section rythmique tendance cajun, accouche de douze chansons bizarroïdes et délurées.

Depuis, on savait que le «Judge» travaillait sur un opus très ambitieux, opus qui apparaît enfin après six ans de préparation. Entièrement rédigé et composé par SMITH, Curly's Airships est une «songstory», une histoire chantée, une narration mise en musique, qui ne doit pas se confondre avec une comédie musicale ou un album concept. L'histoire est inspirée d'un fait divers remontant aux années 1920 : le destin tragique du plus grand des dirigeables jamais construits, le R101. Conçu à la demande du gouvernement anglais au mépris des normes de sécurité, ce géant des airs s'est «crashé» lors de son vol inaugural qui devait mener ses 49 passagers en Inde et qui s'est en fait arrêté à Beauvais.

Découpé en 15 chapitres, ce roman musical s'étale sur 2 CD dépassant chacun les 70 minutes (!) et met en scène plusieurs personnages, pour la plupart imaginaires. Judge SMITH a ainsi endossé le rôle principal, celui de l'officier Curly McLEOD. C'est lui qui raconte l'histoire, livrant sa propre vision des événements, mais le sujet traité permet d'aborder plusieurs thèmes dignes d'une tragédie grecque : l'ambition démesurée, la couardise morale, la morgue et l'incompétence des puissants, le courage insensé, l'aveuglement face à l'absurde... Curly's Airships, c'est à la fois l'histoire de destins humains sacrifiés et le récit d'un drame psychologique qui a secoué toute une nation dans sa folie des grandeurs.

«Curly» SMITH a ainsi convié plusieurs artistes à prêter leur voix aux personnages. Parmi eux, il y a des «idoles» de SMITH, à savoir rien moins qu'Arthur BROWN en personne dans les rôles d'un président de comité hypocrite et d'un commandant de bord anxieux, et Peter HAMMILL, impressionnant dans son rôle du clinquant Lord THOMSON, personnage qui a vraiment existé ! Dans la mesure où cette «songstory» mêle la réalité et la fiction, on ne peut donc lui adjoindre la fameuse sentence «toute ressemblance avec des personnages réels serait purement fortuite...»

David SHAW-PARKER, Paul ROBERTS (THE STRANGLERS), Pete BROWN (parolier de CREAM) comptent parmi les autres «acteurs» et jouent différents rôles ; on notera également la prestation d'un somptueux ténor classique, Paul THOMSON. Évidemment, le sujet n'était pas propice à la création de personnages féminins ; aussi la seule voix féminine est-elle celle de Gwendolyn GRAY dans le rôle d'un médium.

La «distribution» paraît chargée, il n'en reste pas moins que les interventions de chacun sont sporadiques. Le personnage dominant est, évidemment, celui de Curly. Autant dire qu'on a intérêt à se familiariser avec la voix particulière de Judge SMITH. Curly's Airships étant son oeuvre, on ne peut lui en vouloir de s'être mis en avant. Du reste, Judge SMITH assure également la guitare basse et la batterie, ce qui peut surprendre quand on sait qu'il se définit lui-même comme un «batteru incompetent» (sic) ! On est cependant loin d'avoir affaire à un «one-man show» puisque, là encore, Judge a su s'entourer de plusieurs musiciens de renom.

Parmi eux, il y a comme par hasard des anciens du CRAZY WORLD OF ARTHUR BROWN, des STRANGLERS et de VDGG ! Sur chaque pièce, on retrouve ainsi l'excellent guitariste John ELLIS et Hugh BANTON. La contribution de celui-ci est du reste inestimable puisque, non content d'apporter une grande variété de sons avec ses différents orgues conçus par lui-même, il s'est également occupé de reproduire les effets sonores des moteurs de dirigeables en trafiquant ses orgues. Mentionnons aussi parmi les membres quasi permanents Rikki PATTEN (guitare additionnelle), David SHAW-PARKER (guitare acoustique) et le toujours appréciable David JACKSON (saxophones alto, soprano et ténor, flûtes...).

Tout a été mis en oeuvre pour que Curly's Airships soit musicalement stimulant et évite la monotonie stylistique. Selon les épisodes, on tombe soudain sur un thème de tango, sur de la musique de danse des années 20 (ambiance rétro garantie, avec banjo, mandolin, whistle et accordéon), sur une marche militaire ou encore sur de la musique indienne, avec sitar et tablas. Il n'en fallait pas moins pour retenir l'attention de l'auditeur sur plus de deux heures !

Soucieux de réalisme, SMITH a recueilli une abondante documentation : outre le libretto, un autre livret contient diverses notes sur la production, le contexte historique, une bibliographie, et même un glossaire explicitant les expressions idiomatiques et le jargon aéronautique de l'époque ! Enfin, Judge a aussi eu l'idée d'enregistrer quelques parties de guitare et d'orgue dans certains lieux évoqués par l'histoire, comme le hangar du R101 et diverses cathédrales (Cardington, Beauvais...).

On retrouve ce souci de réalisme dans l'écriture des textes qui revêt une forme narrative non assujettie à la rime. Ce faisant, les chansons sont elles-mêmes affranchies du carcan couplet-refrain. Les lignes mélodiques s'épanouissent au-delà de cette contrainte structurelle, suivent les mouvements des phrasés vocaux et leur flux peut parfois s'apparenter à celui de vocalises improvisées. De ce fait, les 26 compositions de ce double album se démarquent des structures conventionnelles et s'apparentent plutôt à des suites de thèmes, de «leitmotives» liés à un personnage, une pensée, une émotion ou une situation psychologique qui peuvent être récurrents en fonction des ressorts dramatiques du récit. Ainsi, on peut retrouver une séquence d'accords, un riff ou un thème dans plusieurs morceaux sous différentes formes.

Voilà une démarche compositionnelle qui n'est pas loin de celle des musiques progressives et qui, en tout cas, rassurera ceux qui craignaient avoir affaire à de la banale chansonnette. A sa manière, Judge SMITH fait du rock sophistiqué sans sombrer dans le pompiérisme.

De plus, là où le sujet de l'histoire aurait conduit d'autres auteurs à une adaptation larmoyante aux effets appuyés, Judge ne s'est pas départi de ce sens du cocasse qu'on lui connaît. (Cf. la chanson jouée à la radio, juste avant le crash, par les «HUGHIE BANTON'S MAYFAIR AVIATORS» (!) ou cette chaussure de femme retrouvée dans les débris et qui aurait appartenu à Lord THOMSON !) Le résultat force d'autant plus le respect que Curly's Airships n'affiche pas particulièrement d'ambition commerciale et a bénéficié somme toute de peu de moyens. Cela ne l'empêche pas d'être une oeuvre à priori sans équivalent.

Curly's Airships, on l'aura compris, n'autorise pas une écoute distraite. Certes, sa longueur peut rebuter, d'autant que l'auditeur français devra suivre le libretto pour mieux comprendre les textes et ainsi suivre le déroulement de l'intrigue. Mais une fois qu'on se laisse captiver, on n'en décroche plus et, comme pour tout bon roman ou film, on retient son souffle jusqu'à l'épilogue. «Il manque juste l'image», me direz-vous ? Plus pour longtemps : Judge SMITH envisage de porter son histoire sur scène, avec «backing tracks» décors et costumes. Un projet de vidéo et de DVD est même à l'étude.

Les dirigeables de l'officier Curly sont prêts pour de nouveaux vols... Cette fois, on veut bien être à bord !

Stephane Fougere

February 2001
Record Collector Magazine.

Perhaps one of the most ambitious projects attempted by any artist for many years "Curly's Airships" is a conceptual song-story by occasional Peter Hammill collaborator Judge Smith. Based on the ill-fated R101 airship, this impressive work was six years in the making and features a cast including Hammill, Arthur Brown, Pete Brown, David Jackson, Hugh Banton and Paul Roberts.

Before you let the word 'concept' put you off, the calibre and ability of the musicians saves the album from becoming tedious. In fact, it's most entertaining. The performances are enthusiastic and well-executed, with the second disc providing the most satisfying moments. Musically, one can draw comparisons with Frank Zappa's more complex work, but that doesn't really do it justice.

Aside from the originality of the music, the detailed historical research by Smith almost justifies purchase alone - a lavishly illustrated 48-page booklet features informative historical background. A wonderful and well-crafted work for which Judge Smith deserves much praise.

Mark Powell

January 2001

NO WARNING! <http://digilander.iol.it/anewland/nowarn.htm>

Un imponente monumento musicale! Non trovo altre parole per sintetizzare un giudizio su questa ambiziosa opera rock, degnissima erede di storici progetti quali Jesus Christ Superstar o Tommy. Ha impiegato ben sei anni, il buon Judge Smith, per realizzare questa che lui ha voluto chiamare una "songstory", anche perché il gran lavoro svolto non si è limitato al solo aspetto musicale, ma ha richiesto anche una paziente ed accurata ricerca storica per ricostruire la vicenda del grande dirigibile R101 precipitato nel 1930 durante il suo viaggio inaugurale dall'Inghilterra verso l'India. La struttura di Curly's Airships è quella propria di un'opera, con tanto di libretto accluso che guida l'ascolto passo dopo passo, riportando dettagliatamente la sequenza dei temi (l'autore ha pensato infatti anche ad un adattamento teatrale e ad una versione in formato DVD). Musicalmente siamo al cospetto di un riuscito blending di sonorità, che abbraccia le peculiarità dei Van Der Graaf Generator, il surreale universo di Frank Zappa, la musica operistica, la musica popolare degli anni 20/30 e le fanfare militari, il tutto teso a formare un inscindibile insieme (come fu in passato per The Lamb Lies Down On Broadway e Thing Fish) da gustare dall'inizio alla fine lungo gli oltre 140 minuti di durata dell'opera, con l'unica inevitabile interruzione data dal cambio tra il primo ed il secondo disco. Tra gli ospiti presenti, in un cast che conta ben diciotto partecipanti, si segnalano David Jackson, Hugh Banton, Peter Hammill, John Ellis, Arthur Brown e l'ex Stranglers Paul Roberts. La presenza di buona parte degli ex membri dei Van Der Graaf Generator si fa ovviamente sentire, soprattutto nelle parti vocali (e questo anche laddove non è Hammill a cantare) e nelle parti strumentali ad opera di Banton e Jackson, ma non aspettatevi le oscure esplorazioni all'interno dell'animo umano che caratterizzarono capolavori come H To He e Pawn Hearts : la musica è molto "descrittiva" e ben si fonde con i testi della vicenda, dando quasi una resa a visiva che coinvolge l'ascoltatore e lo catapulta all'indietro nel tempo, nell'Inghilterra degli anni '20. Curly's Airships è totalmente intriso di pathos : chiudete gli occhi dopo aver schiacciato il tasto "play" (it's so strange here ...), e lasciatevi guidare dal racconto di questa vicenda di uomini coraggiosi, di ambiziosi politici, di pionieristiche sfide e di ferrei codici d'onore. Tali saranno le sensazioni che ne ricaverete che non potrete non rimanere affascinati da questo racconto. Ascoltate, ad esempio, in quello che è il momento culminante della vicenda (Hastings To Beauvais) come il sax soprano di David Jackson sull'incalzante base ritmica dia effettivamente l'idea di un'impavido e folle volo sotto la furia degli elementi, prima del fatale schianto sul suolo francese. Ci sarebbe da scrivere un mare di parole per descrivere minuziosamente questo capolavoro scritto in forma libera da metriche su innumerevoli temi ricorrenti assemblati con rara maestria, penso che il modo migliore per rendere giustizia a questo disco sia quello di consigliarvene caldamente l'acquisto, e lasciare che il lavoro di Judge Smith vi conquisti in breve tempo, costringendovi ad una sua assidua presenza nel vostro lettore CD.

December 2000

New Horizons. <http://www.elrose.demon.co.uk>

Chris Judge Smith was one of the founder members of Van Der Graaf Generator and he has worked on all manner of projects over the years, from rock operas to TV music. Over the past six years he has been researching and working on an ambitious project entitled 'Curly's Airships' which, I have to say, is a truly remarkable piece of work by any standard.

Smith uses a technique which he explains in the accompanying notes as a songstory - rather than calling it a concept album. Space does not permit me to attempt to explain the ins and outs here although he explains it very well.

An accomplished team of musicians has been pulled together to assist in this grand scheme, including former Van Der Graaf Generator members David Jackson, Hugh Banton and Peter Hammill (playing the part of Lord Thompson), as well as the likes of Arther Brown (Crazy World of) and Keith Ellis, to name but a few.

The story is told from the perspective of junior officer Curly McLeod and, although he is fictitious, his experiences are certainly not. Curly tells his story, through a spirit medium, as an ongoing narrative: looking first at the early airship flights, leading to the development and finally the destruction of the R101 itself on 25th October 1930. The relevance of the medium here should not be overlooked since, during the original investigations into the crash, a medium claimed to have been visited by the spirits of some of the dead crew members who wanted to be heard ... and certainly some of the revelations that were made were interesting to say the least! During the telling, other characters appear to play out key scenes, but they do not directly interact with the main narrative.

This attention to detail is breathtaking in that not only does 'Curly's Airships' give a clear and accurate portrayal of what life working on the airships must have been like, but it also examines in depth some of the potential motives of the main protagonists, as well as looking at some of the bureaucratic mistakes that compounded the problems. Human motivations are necessarily complex and open to interpretation by others and, of course, the story has to be cut down to a manageable format but it is clear that the research for this work has been extensive and the result is that we are presented with a very plausible explanation of events.

Musically this work is awesome, mixing classical composition with pure rock, into over two hours of what I can only describe as riveting entertainment. Although the album is split into tracks, there are very few individual songs in the true sense, and really this is an album that deserves to be listened to in its entirety. All of the musicians excel from first to last, but special mention must be given to the guitar work of John Ellis, Hugh Banton's superb keyboard playing and to David Jackson for his sax work.

From the vocal point of view there are aspects of the sound that may initially strike as being a little quirky. Judge Smith's depiction of Curly is very intense and can be a little overbearing at times, but he does an excellent job and gets the most out of the performance. The inclusion of period slang throughout adds considerably to the overall atmosphere, and it is just this attention to detail that helps make this album the masterpiece it undoubtedly is. Again it is hard to single out individual players but mention should be made to Paul Robert's strong contribution and to Peter Hammill's excellent characterisation.

I'd hate anyone to get the impression though that this album is heavy going and serious all the way through as it certainly does have its lighter side. One particular favourite of mine happens shortly before the crash; we hear a short song being broadcast on the radio which has a perfect period feel to it, the announcer tells us at the end that this was played by 'Hughie Banton's Mayfair Aviators'.

Incidentally it is worth pointing out that the CD was issued 60 years to the day after the events portrayed, and that one of the recording locations was the airship hanger at Cardington, Bedfordshire where the R101 was built and housed. Also, the church organs at Cardington, the parish church for the Royal Airship Works and Beauvais Cathedral, near to where the disaster struck, are both featured adding a nice touch.

I feel I must also say a bit about the packaging that comes with the CD as it is very extensive and adds a lot to the experience. There are two booklets enclosed, both over forty pages

long. One carries extensive notes about the concept of a songstory, the historical background, and information about the actual composition. In addition there are photos of the various people involved in the project, many taken in period costume, as well as a detailed summary of who does what on which tracks and a full glossary explaining some of the terminology used in the text. This is backed up by a select bibliography, should you wish to know more about airships, as well as some pictures and facts about some of the craft referenced in the story. The second booklet is the full libretto preceded by a section that lays out the various musical themes or leitmotifs that occur throughout the work. If this is not enough for you there is also a superb web site which will give you even more information as well as links to other airship related sites - you can also find some sound samples there to listen to.

Well you can probably tell by now that I am very impressed by this album. In many ways it is a quintessentially English work, but this should in no way diminish its lasting appeal. In addition to being a first rate story portrayed brilliantly to music, it also covers the subject in such depth that it leaves you gasping for more. Even if you come to this with no interest in airships, I can pretty much guarantee that you will not leave feeling quite the same as Curly's obvious passion for the subject cannot help but rub off on you.

I have to take my hat off to Judge Smith and say full marks all around for this album - a great achievement which I heartily recommend to all.

Finally, here's a thought. Even though I am very sceptical about the paranormal, maybe, just maybe, Curly really is giving a chance for the victims of the R101 disaster to be properly heard through the medium of this work ...

Simon

November 2000

Progressive Music Newsgroup. rec.music.progressive

I ordered on Friday and my CD arrived yesterday (Tuesday) - quick, even by BOL or Amazon standards. I was supposed to be 'working from home' on a project appraisal, but thought, "I'll just listen to the first couple of tracks." I ended up listening to the whole thing twice through. Then it was lunchtime.

I was going to start on the project appraisal after lunch, but as I sat supping my coffee, listening to the R.33 being walked out of it's shed, I thought "Sod it." and listened to the whole thing again.

This album is nothing like Usher, Democracy or Dome. This is truly inspired. From the slick design of the CD package to the choice of participating musicians to the depth and quality of the sound, the whole thing screams "CLASS". I'm not sure if Judge used so many big names like Hammill, Paul Roberts, John Ellis and Arthur Brown for the "fan appeal", but if he did, it doesn't come across like that in the music. The whole thing sounds like they all worked very closely together and there are no attempts to "steal the show" although Hammill's performance as Lord Thompson, the villain of the piece, is particularly outstanding.

I have a sneaking suspicion that this is going to be progrock album of the year once word gets out.

Thanks for flagging this up. Now back to the (late) project appraisal...

K2N

November 2000

PH7 - Peter Hammill/Van Der Graaf Generator List. <http://tile.net/listserv/ph7peter.html>

Well, what can I say... I've listened to it for the second time now, and I still can't find a single boring minute! I actually found myself stopping what I was doing (which in my case is always

at least two things at the same time) and sitting down and listening. Just listening. With all the stuff that's going on in there, the piece deserves to be called a film without the pictures...

In short, the thing has a similar elegance-to-size ratio as one of Curly's actual airships, though not necessarily the stricken R101 itself, as we are reliably informed that she flew "like a pig"... echoes (no, not the song!) of Pink Floyd crop up all over the place, drifting through lemon-meringue clouds that are really "rather good".

I can't say that I was particularly enthusiastic about airships before I heard this (not surprising perhaps as you don't see them around much these days. And for those of us who mistake a blimp for a proper airship, Judge has provided some excellent linkage on his website...), but I came away with a very clear image in my head of what it must have been like to fly, and indeed crash, one of these. Especially the last minutes of the doomed R101 are recreated on the album in such clarity and detail that one wonders how they managed to do it without actually _recording_ an airship crashing. Well, the thunder and rain were recorded on location if I remember correctly, as was the organ of the cathedral nearby... but the actual airship noises are all courtesy of Judge's wonderful band of assorted geniuses and madmen (all very appropriately pictured in the booklet, though sadly misspelled in the case of Rene Van Commenee who's missing one of his many e's).

And yet, the music is best when it's simply being music - airship noises and atmospheric aside, the 1920 roar past in a series of charlestons, tangos (the latter all sung by Peter Hammill. Appropriate for an admirer of Piazzolla's :), improbably catchy shanties and jittery marching band tunes interspersed with heavy rifferama, quiet narrative bits, and culminating in what must be the saddest funeral march ever put on record, to be followed by one of the few recognisable "songs" in the traditional sense, sung by an assortment of extremely fine voices. Who is this Paul Roberts anyway? He's got a great voice, and I feel inclined to hear more from him. Any ideas, lads?

Anyway, I feel I'll have to listen to the whole thing a few more times before I can pass any qualified comments, but let me just at this point say that it's even better than I had anticipated it after hearing snippets back in 97, and I was pretty amazed even then... a huge "well done!" to Judge (best vocals from you ever, mate!) and his merry band, and let's hope he sells enough to keep going on to the next project, whatever that may be...

...and yes, we're all airship...er, persons :)

Dagmar 41

November 2000

PH7 - Peter Hammill/Van Der Graaf Generator List. <http://tile.net/listserv/ph7peter.html>

Before I'd even played the CDs I've been absolutely bowled over by the completeness of the package...for twenty quid you get 2 and a half hours of music and two thick booklets which are jam-packed with readable stuff. All the libretto of course and a useful 'who's who on each track' breakdown... but also: an explanation of what the project is (a Songstory apparently - well I won't argue with that); a run-down of the history of the Historical facts and their relationship to the story here; a précis of the musical processes behind it; a glossary of some of the obscure RAF terms used in libretto (and a few which are just plain English ones ie. completely incomprehensible idioms to the rest of the world); a bibliography; photos and specifications of the major airships featured in the piece; a silhouette drawing displaying just how insanely huge these things were (a Tri-Star airliner is dwarfed by the R101); and a schematic showing the recurrence of the main leitmotifs (representative themes) within the piece. And not to forget: several pages of photographs. Genuine ones from the time; recreated ones from the present, showing the full cast of performers. Thus David Shaw-Parker is shown staring intensely at a design chart of the airship as he often plays a Government Committee member and an airship officer. And the photo of PH is a classic - he's done up to look like his character, the suave and sophisticated - but utterly ruthless and somewhat unsavoury - Lord Thomson. Love that hat!

David Jackson produces some fine noises too... and that little Lemming is a rather

accomplished musician too. The real stars of the music are, for me, Hugh Banton and John Ellis, who contribute on every track. Just incredible stuff - and it's real Rock. No synthesisers at all - and even the drum-machines are used to good effect for most of the time (no real-life drums could re-create the sound of propellers in quite the way Judge manages it here).

Judge himself does an incredible job. He has a fine voice; as well-enunciated as PH's and just as suited to dramatic roles. I'm sure that at times this project must have seem as mad as the doomed venture which is its subject matter...but ironically there are more positive parallels. Curly as a character is a man who is obsessed with flying; he is single-minded and brave in a way which most of us can scarcely comprehend these days perhaps. It's also a very old-fashioned kind of British bravery...which most other people would label 'insanity' in that a reckless regard for 'duty' is a major cause of the disaster. But Curly's love of airships (- beautifully richly conveyed in the track 'Curly in the Clouds', especially in the section which rapturously describes what it is like to see and fly into a cloud...and which is then leant a humorous and endearingly British bit of bathos by his comment "clouds are rather good...") is so convincingly portrayed because there's a similar passion behind this project. These were at some stages both, as Sean puts it, "unimaginable creations".

Don't be daunted by all the written material though - the story is simply related through the Songstory itself. There are a few genuine songs - notably in the form of the various recurrences of sea shanties (sung by the Church Tenor - Judge says he hates the "bellowing" of the operatic kind - Paul Thompson) and in the final track. But largely this is a sung *story*, with no rhyme as that would have interfered with the natural patterns of speech. But it's certainly not "difficult" to sit through - I was riveted. And as the organ of Beauvais cathedral thunders against the noise of the stricken R101 (the sounds of which were also created by Hugh Banton's - er - incredible organ... well, there really is no other way of putting it!) I felt shivers up and down my spine.

PH sneers his way through 3 tracks, obviously enjoying himself. Especially when he gets to spit out phrases like "those bastards in Yorkshire" and "ignorant peasant". What a villain! And I'm left with a nasty impression of exactly what Lord Thomson was doing with that woman's shoe. No, I'm saying no more about that one...

...you'll have to buy it - for that reason, even if you're not convinced by the glowing comments from Sean and I.

Charlotte Hendry

November 2000

The Official Paul Roberts Web Site. <http://www.paul-roberts.co.uk>

The long, roundabout way to explain this, is to dip into everyone's childhood. When you were young, you heard music. It was everywhere. Mum's music, dad's faves, it was all around. Then you went to school, and it was there, too. People talking about this band, that band, this singer, that guitarist. Then, one day, out of the blue, you hear IT. You know IT, IT is that stuff that sounds like music, but IT isn't. IT stirs you far more than that music stuff. IT has edges, ideas, twists, turns. You might not even understand IT, but something pushes you to try.

Judge Smith has tapped into a rich vein of IT. Curly's Airships is superb.

From the outset of receiving this new album, you can see that you are in possession of something special. The whole package is beautiful, from the silky look of the cover, to the impressively well produced books. The CD's go on, and the books come out. Just like the old days of music and album sleeves - things are not the same now.

The songs range from quirky sea shanties, to comedic pieces, from the instrument induced airship noises to the hypnotic sitar of an Indian theme. I have a penchant for Thompson's Tangos myself. And the way the different strands are dragged together is unique. To try to explain this, you have to understand that each "track" is made of multiple parts. There isn't a song, as such. Each song has 3 or so songs within it. And then there is the question of

whether there are any songs at all.

The individual performances are staggering. The guitar work of John Ellis and the vocals of Paul Roberts are well known to the readers of these pages, but perhaps the fact that both performers sustain this over the entirety of this album is something new. Paul's performances as "Colmore" particularly are as good as he has ever performed.

The tracks that include Paul Roberts vocals are superb, but that is just the tip of this iceberg.

The shock for me came with the rest of the cast. These people are good. From the soaring heights with Paul Thompson, to the fabulous vocals of The Judge himself, there is not a single duff performance. One of the best performances, vocally, is *The Night Before*, where Paul Roberts, Arthur Brown, Paul Thompson and Pete Hammill reach vocal perfection.

But more than anything, it's Judge Smith's writing that is astonishing. It isn't in a standard song format - in fact Judge himself expounds his ideas about what he has created in one of the two booklets contained within the CD box. From singing, vocalese, narrative, tenor, harmony, time signatures, free form, there are no limits to this album.

How this album developed, I can only guess at. There must have been moments where Judge Smith didn't think he could finish the work. Thank God he did, though.

This is such a dense work. It will take forever to unpeel every layer.

If you do not own a copy of this album yet, I strongly recommend that you get one. This is an album of immense proportions, to the point of not being one album at all. There is so much in this.

Chris Lammiman

June 2000

The New Red Archives. <http://www.newredarchives.com>

This curious project sounded intriguing. I was already a fan of early Van der Graaf Generator, particularly the seminal "Pawn Hearts" LP including the atmospheric song chronicle "Plague of Lighthouse Keepers". Likewise Peter Hammill's very personal solo album "Over" was an essential landmark at the close of an extraordinary innovative period of British music. At the core of "Curly's Airships" are ex-Van der Graaf members Peter Hammill (vocals), Dave Jackson (sax) and Hugh Banton (organ), and [it] was written and narrated by Judge Smith, himself a founding member of the embryonic Van der Graaf Generator. Augmenting the ensemble are veterans Arthur Brown (from the Crazy World) and Pete Brown (from the Battered Ornaments). The musicianship is beyond reproach, from the marvelous use of the drums, to the outstanding performance by John Ellis (Vibrators, Stranglers and Peter Gabriel). John Ellis is without doubt a master craftsman of the guitar and manages to excel without ever degenerating into self-indulgency.

His crisp and precise execution plus astute perception of the spirit of Curly's Airships is the musical glue that binds this eclectic masterpiece together. Peter Hammill's distinctive voice is perfectly utilised in the role of the arrogant Baron Thompson, and contrasts marvelously with the classic tenor as the helmsman singing a wonderfully realised sea shanty. The real star of the project though is the story as told by crewman Curly (Judge Smith). The Story of the R.101 - the world's biggest airship, and the folly that led to its demise and death of most of its crew. The story is compelling, and Smith's lyrics absolutely draw you in. The normally boring facts become tantalising bursts of momentum in the midst of Smith's skilful narrative. Throughout he strikes the perfect balance between statistics, poetry, story development and imagery. Add to this an attention to detail, convincing placement of sound effects and dialog, an Indian music ensemble, a military brass band and you have a recording [of] incalculable value. As yet unreleased, "Curly's Airships" is destined to become the accepted masterpiece of a prototype genre "the songstory" or a treasured oddity for discerning collectors.

Nicky Garratt

July 1999

WightOnLine. <http://www.wightonline.co.uk/>

The special guest at July's 'Friends at Home' evening was Judge Smith: the first word is his Christian name, not his profession!

Smith, a founding member of the 60's rock band Van der Graaf Generator, went on to form a band with the architect Maxwell Hutchinson, and to write some successfully performed rock operas, as well as songs for the TV show 'Not The 9 O'Clock News'. Only a year before, in the same room, Anthony Minghella had told me about how Van der Graaf were his favourite rock musicians.

As well as signing copies of his various CDs, Judge Smith gave a world premiere of part of his one-man show, 'Curly's Airships'. With the aid of a reel-to-reel tape straight from his home studio, and donning a captain's hat, he was transformed into the pilot of an airship, brought back from the dead. The results were startling, with Curly's expression reminiscent of the gentle bemusement of Alastair Sim, and transported the audience to a time when airships were competing with aeroplanes as the future of public transport.

A memorable evening for all who attended, which also included new poems and original songs by others present. Judge Smith joined in with great gusto on the concluding musical jam - grand piano and five guitars - on 'Hey Joe'.

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Performers

JUDGE SMITH

Vocals and Bass & Drum Tracks

JOHN ELLIS

Electric Guitars & Ebow, Mandolin

HUGH BANTON

Organs & Piano

DAVID SHAW-PARKER

Acoustic Guitar, Banjo, Vocals & Actor

ARTHUR BROWN

Vocals

PETE BROWN

Percussion & Vocals

PETER HAMMILL

Vocals

PAUL ROBERTS

Vocals

PAUL THOMPSON

Vocals

DAVID JACKSON

Saxophones & Whistle

JOE HINCHLIFF

Accordion

RIKKI PATTEN

Supplementary Guitar

IAN FORDHAM

Bass Guitar & Double Bass

RENÉ VAN COMMENEE

Tabla, Ghatam & Tambura

TAMMO HEIKENS

Sitar & Tambura

NICK LUCAS

Vocals & Actor

GWENDOLYN GRAY

Actor

MIKE BELL

Actor

And **THE MYSTERY MARCHING BAND**



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Inside Shed No. 2 at Cardington



No. 2 Shed was the home of the R.100 during her flying career. It is now the Building Research Establishment's testing facility and is strictly off-limits to the public, but on Sept. 18th 1994, the BRE held an open day, and the gigantic structure could at last be seen from close quarters in all its splendour. I was at a very early stage in the writing of Curly's Airships, and travelled from Norfolk to Bedford for this rare event. I was overwhelmed by the sheer vastness of the space, a space that, in Curly's day, was almost entirely filled (to within six feet at either end) by the airship it sheltered. My photo shows a couple of substantial 1920s fire engines dwarfed like toys at one end of the shed. Nothing today gives a better idea of what the giant airships must have been like than a visit to the Cardington sheds.

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Design Block, Royal Airship Works



The remainder of the buildings of the Royal Airship Works, including this substantial block which housed the design and management offices, was in use until recently as an RAF maintenance unit. The RAF have now moved out, ending an eighty-three year connection with aviation for the site, and the Design Block will now probably be demolished. So much drama was played out in this gloomy building. It was here that, at the very moment the R.101 met her end, the night-duty telephone operator was startled to see his switchboard show a repeated request for an outside line from Captain Irwin's empty office. He nervously went to investigate, but the place was deserted.

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Judge at the Airship Heritage Museum



One of the other buildings of the old Airship Works housed, until recently, the unique archive and collection of the Airship Heritage Trust . Here I am admiring one of the original wiring 'centroids' of the R.100, one of Barnes Wallis's radical and brilliant design solutions to the problems he encountered on his way to achieving the first example of geodesic construction, the engineering theory he was to later bring to perfection with the Wellington Bomber. With the closure of the RAF station at Cardington, the Airship Heritage Trust's museum has been transferred to premises at the Shuttleworth Collection at Old Warden.

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John Ellis at the 'Masters Of Art' Studio



John 'Fury' Ellis playing his trusty Levinson 'Blade' guitar at my 'Masters of Art' studio in deepest Sussex. John used only this one guitar, a relatively humble Strat copy, for all his work on Curly's Airships, and a single effects box, the less-than-top-of-the-line Quadraverb GT, to produce the extraordinary variety of guitar sounds. It seems that great musicians don't need fancy kit. 'Fury' works fast, and generates a constant flow of ideas. I had to keep on my toes to catch it all on tape.

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John and Cliff



I am lucky enough to live quite close to the white cliffs of the South Coast of England. John and I would work pretty intensively for a few days at a time recording his innumerable guitar tracks, but we often found time to catch some sea air on the beach.

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...Men in the Pub (Officers at the Hotel)



On an 'actors only' day at the studio, to record the brief spoken word sections of the piece, I take the 'Thesps' to lunch at a local pub. From left to right, Nick Lucas (the man on the Carte d'Or advert who can make his buttocks dance to the tune of Rule Britannia), me, David Shaw-Parker (the voice of The Brollys and author of 'The Lemming Chronicles'), and Mike Bell (currently to be seen in the musical 'Fame').

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David Shaw-Parker Does The Beach



David Shaw-Parker sang and played all the acoustic guitar on Curly's, as well as his acting duties, so he was a frequent visitor to Sussex throughout 1998. Here, he takes the air on our famous beach. Among his many skills, David is an expert on the Surrealist Movement; but then you could probably guess this by the green suit.

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Arthur Brown and Judge



One of the high points of the project has been the chance to work with Arthur. He really was an idol of mine when I was eighteen. At the time Peter Hammill and I were starting Van der Graaf Generator, Arthur and Frank Zappa were my two real gods. I never met Zappa but Arthur's become a chum. An astonishing artist and a remarkable man. Here we are at the Long Man of Wilmington, an ancient and significant chalk figure cut in the Downs near where I live.

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Van Der Graaf Redux



This remarkable photo (by Fiona Lindsay) was taken during celebrations to mark Hugh Banton's 50th Birthday. The Van der Graaf Generator alumnae/survivors shown here are (Left to Right) David Jackson, Guy Evans, Peter Hammill, Judge Smith and Hugh Banton. With the exception of Guy Evans, all can be heard on Curly's Airships. In fact, the particular VDDG line-up shown here never actually played together. I left the band and recruited David Jackson for my next band, Heebalob, and he joined Van der Graaf after Heebalob disbanded.

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Judge and Gwendoline Gray



Gwen is the voice of The Medium whose 'channelling' of the dead Curly McLeod forms the body of the work. This veteran actress has had a long and varied career which began in the 1930s. She has worked in the West End and the Provinces, in dramas and in pantomime, been coached by Sybil Thorndike and Lewis Casson, toured North Africa and Italy with ENSA during the war (when she had a regular radio record show, thus becoming perhaps the first British woman disk-jockey), had a grand success as the heroine of Jean Cocteau's drama 'The Eagle Has Two Heads', and starred in early television plays and some of the first British commercials. Until his death in 1982, she was married to the extraordinary John Hargrave, the visionary youth leader, writer and artist, known as 'White Fox', who was the Founder-Leader of the radical woodcraft movement the Kibbo Kift.

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Beauvais Cathedral



This extraordinary 13th Century building consists mainly of the highest gothic Choir in the world, the only completed part of what might have become the biggest cathedral in the world. Hugh Banton and I came here to record the gigantic cathedral organ for one track of the work.

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Ground Zero



While at Beauvais to record the cathedral organ, we used maps from the period to make a pilgrimage to the site of the R.101 crash. The nose of the airship came to rest on the edge of the wood behind Hugh, with the hull stretching back almost as far as our position. A small stone monument stands in the wood to mark the spot. Unfortunately the French hunting season was in full swing at the time of our visit, and the woods bristled with 'Chantier Interdit' notices. Anything that moves is game, including British musicians, so we stayed in the open, but we were still slowly cruised by a car full of suspicious gendarmes.

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Lest We Forget



Shortly after the crash, the French authorities erected this most impressive monument on the outskirts of Beauvais to the victims of the disaster. Their forty-eight names are inscribed on the obelisk. We laid flowers on behalf of the Curly team.

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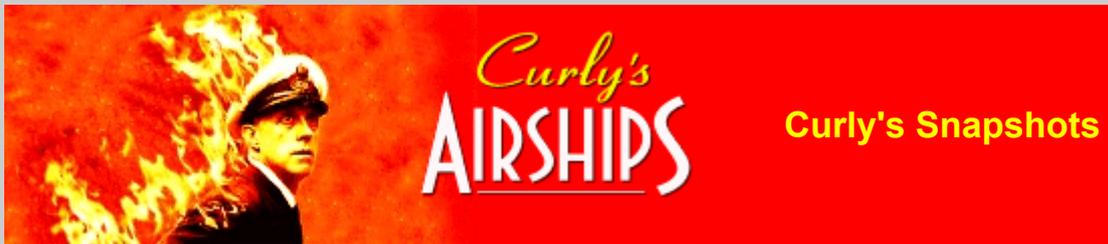
Musee Souvenir du Dirigeable Anglais R.101



I am standing in front of the splendidly eccentric R.101 Museum in Beauvais. This is a private museum run, with no official support, by a local enthusiast who has put together, against all odds, a wonderful collection of airship memorabilia: testimony to the grip on the imagination which airships can still exert in the most unlikely ways.

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St Mary's Church, Cardington



This pretty country church, mostly dating from the 18th Century but with some sections dating back to Norman times, is within sight of the great sheds of the Airship Station. It was the parish church of the Royal Airship Works and some of the crew of the R.101 used to worship there. Hugh Banton and I decided that, in the same way that we recorded the organ of Beauvais Cathedral for a section at the end of the airship's fatal flight, we should also incorporate the Cardington church organ for an episode just before the flight begins.

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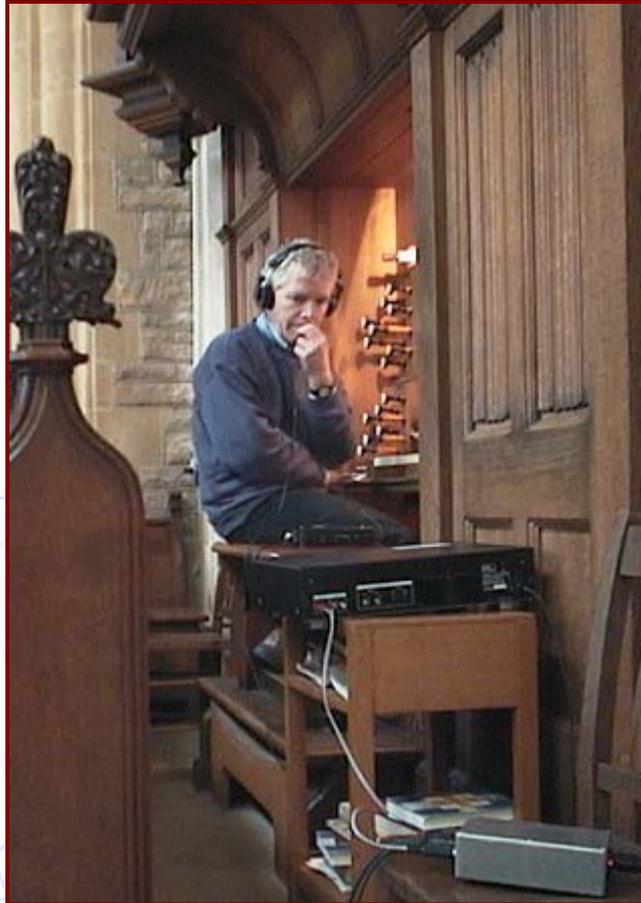
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Hugh Banton in the Pilot's seat



The vicar of Cardington, the Revd. Nigel Morrell, kindly gave us permission to record and we moved in for the afternoon with our equipment. Here, Hugh is listening to a playback. Judging by his expression, this was not the final take. The church also displays the scorched Air Force ensign which was flying from the lookout's cockpit at the far stern of the R.101 when it crashed. Of the hundreds of thousands of square feet of fabric on the airship, this was the only piece to survive.

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The Churchyard of St Mary's, Cardington



From the churchyard, the two airship sheds can be clearly seen. Because of their huge size, they seem quite close, but they are, in fact about half-a-mile away. The church yard is the site of the mass grave of the victims of the disaster. The fine monument which marks the spot can be seen on the ['Ship's Manifest'](#) page.

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Outside the Cardington Sheds



We also made an expedition to record the unique sound ambience that exists inside the sheds. Hugh and I are with Den Burchmore of the Airship Heritage Trust who generously used his good offices to get us inside Shed No 1 (to the Left), in use at that time as a warehouse - hence the blue 'artic' parked outside. No 2 Shed (to the Right) is now part of the Building Research Establishment.

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Recording in Shed No.1



I am carrying a battery-powered guitar amp which is playing back a cassette sound-effects tape of 'men building an airship', and then a tape of John Ellis playing a mighty guitar solo. Hugh Banton wields a portable DAT recorder to capture the amazing echoes. We started out quite close together, as shown, but ended up out of sight of each other amid the piles of plastic goods. The results were well worth the effort.

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The Dutch Connection



In February 1999, I went to The Netherlands to record some short but important passages of Indian music for the final flight of the doomed airship (destination Karachi). Here, in the excellent studio of the Utrecht School of the Arts at Hilversum, are (from Left to Right) a young guy, on work-experience for the day, whose name I forget, engineer Joeri Saal, tabla player René van Commenée and Sitar player Tammo Heikens. René and Tammo are serious and dedicated musicians, already a long way down the difficult and demanding road of classical Indian musical training. I was lucky to find them. Tammo devised some stunning virtuoso duets to go over my rock riffs.

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Mixing with David Lord



Mixing 'Curly's Airships' took thirteen full weeks of work with David Lord in his studio at 'Terra Incognita', Bath. The whole project has been blessed with more than its fair share of good fortune, but getting this legendary producer to mix it was a special bit of luck. He can make most things sound good, and good things sound completely fantastic. It was an education for me. Here, a local singer has called in to brighten our lives. Bath is Music City with hundreds of fine musicians on the scene and they all know David.

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Judge at the Well



As the final demanding year of mixing and vocal recording drew to a close, I took a short break in Glastonbury with my girlfriend, Fiona (who took the picture). It's a favourite place of ours and only an hour from Bath. Here I am at Chalice Well, the epicentre of the genuine strangeness that surrounds this little town, and looking every year of my half century. Six years is a long time to be working on one project.

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Curly's Lighter Than Air Links

- **[The Airship Heritage Trust](#)**
Formerly *Friends of Cardington Airship Station*, The Airship Heritage Trust is a charitable organisation based at Old Warden, Bedfordshire, England. The Trust's website is a mine of interesting information and images about British airships
- **[R101 Casualties](#)**
List of those killed in the R101 disaster courtesy of GENUKI, the UK & Ireland Genealogy Virtual Reference Library
- **[The Imperial Airship Scheme](#)**
A superb 24 page essay, with many original illustrations, by Dr. Renald Fortier of the National Aviation Museum, Canada (PDF format 1.4MB)
- **[Nevil Shute Norway on the Imperial Airship Scheme](#)**
A fascinating account of the R-100 vs R-101 story
- **[Airship](#)**
The Home Page for Lighter-Than-Air Craft. This extensive Hub site provides an impressive number of links to LTA-related sites
- **[Vickers Airship Catalogue](#)**
Reproduction of the 1920s catalogue of the company that built the R.100, with original drawings.
- **[Landings](#)**
Billed as Aviation's busiest cyber-hub, includes current commercial lighter-than-air activities. (Look for the Ballooning link in the extended directory.)
- **[Launch.net](#)**
Lighter than air aviation! An excellent guide to Hot Air Ballooning which covers all aspects of the sport
- **[Cargo Lifter](#)**
The future for lighter than air craft? Check out this very slick site, complete with live webcam showing the progress of the construction of the giant hangar in Germany
- **[Commercial Aviation Photos: Dirigibles, Blimps, Powered Lighter-Than-Air Craft](#)**
Commercial source of lighter-than-air images
- **[Airship and Blimps](#)**
These pages are a volunteer effort to provide information about airships to persons with any level of interest. The main focus is on contemporary development and construction.
- **[Trenches on the Web - Special: Dirigibles, Airships and Zeppelins](#)**
An academic history of the military application of airships.
- **[Naval Airship Association](#)**
Good photographic archive of US naval airships.
- **[Zeppelin](#)**



Buy View Looking Air

An unofficial German Zeppelin site with many links to other sites.

- **[Information about The Airship Association](#)** - the only worldwide body catering solely for people interested in powered lighter-than-air aviation.
- **[BRE Cardington: Home of the R.101 & R.100](#)** The former Royal Airship Works site now has a variety of uses. Shed No. 2, the former home of the R.100 belongs to the Building Research Institute. It is mainly used for fire-testing complete buildings, which are dwarfed by the immense structure.
- **[Aeronautics - Balloons & Airships](#)**
NASA ALLSTAR Network. Well worth a visit.
- **[Zeppelin Library Archive](#)**
Covers other lighter-than-air craft as well.
- **[Joop de Wilde's World Wide Web Balloon Pages](#)**
An excellent resource for all matters relating to Hot Air Ballooning.
- **[eballoon.org - the online ballooning encyclopedia](#)**
An extensive resource for hot air balloon enthusiasts.
- **[U.S. Navy Rigid Airships at Lakehurst](#)**
Brief histories and specifications of the US Rigid airships which were based at this famous US naval base.
- **[Remote Control Indoor Airship \(UK\) US and Canada](#)**
Both Judge and your webmaster have one of these. Pretend you are Curly flying R.33 or R.101 from the comfort of your own armchair!
- **[leiChterAlsluft](#)**
Two German artists who specialise in lighter-than-air related subjects.

For individual artists' links, see the [Crew's Quarters](#).

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