

THE LOST PATRICK McGOOHAN TAPE

The so-called 'L.A.' Tape is a 50 minute film made by Patrick McGoohan in 1983 from his Los Angeles base. In it he presents his personal recollections and explanations regarding The Prisoner and its making, also covering his Number Six 'alter ego' character he played in the series. The interview is given to an off-camera female voice and the seated actor is always in shot. Bearded and wearing an open-neck light blue shirt, McGoohan provides his responses to a 'one take' verbal question and answer session, the single camera format being straightforward, less so the subject matter.

The background to the film is connected to a documentary made for Channel 4 TV, also in 1983, called Six Into One - The Prisoner File, which included an interview with McGoohan, as well some actors and production team members from the series. However, the Californian resident was concerned about others receiving undue credit for ideas, input and involvement and so he decided to film his own material, freely offering it for insertion into the documentary. Unfortunately, the makers had a deadline and the footage could not be cleared in time by the acting unions in any event.



The one hour documentary was screened early in 1984, ending around midnight. This followed what had been the first national British run of the series - in the past, ITV transmissions had been regional around Britain - with Wales having a broadcast on the associated channel S4C. Ironically, the prerecorded programme ended with the presenter giving an instruction to run the tape which had just arrived from L.A. - hence giving the film its assumed title - a throwaway comment which would have been lost on the small viewing audience; also the documentary has never been rescreened, or released for home viewing. Thus McGoohan's film has remained unseen by the public, along with the documentary - apart from the latter being seen by those relatively few night owls who, three decades ago, tuned in to was then a minority channel, barely a year old.

The actor reveals that the idea for The Prisoner came to him as far back as 1959, when he was in Portmeirion filming initial half hour Danger Man monochrome stories. He recalls how he was "astounded by this dreamlike Village" and thought that "Portmeirion would be a marvellous place to film a movie." The central character would be isolated, having to deal with unfair bureaucracy, while the resort's architecture was so mixed, viewing audiences would not know where it was. McGoohan's vision was that the place would hold people who were "in a position where they had access to vital information of national importance, a scientist, or a top government official, or even a secret agent".

The actor explains how he came up with the penny farthing emblem, the antiquated bicycle being an “ironic symbol of progress, because... we’re going too fast, we don’t have time to assimilate as much as we should. It also had a sort of elegance about it.” Additionally, he recounts the origin of the white sphere and how they had to buy a supply of meteorological balloons, along with cylinders of oxygen and helium, to create the terrifying entity, the Village ‘guardian’.

McGoohan describes Arrival as “the best pilot script I ever read”, it being “a composite of all the ideas and themes we had to touch upon in the episodes.” The penultimate episode Once Upon a Time is put forward by McGoohan as “a favourite one of mine. It’s a little bit autobiographical and it’s always nice to get that stuff out of your system.” He also recalls the outcry after the series’ finale, with viewers demanding answers to questions. Although the actor left Britain at the time, now, years later, he explains, “It was an allegory, a story in which people, places, happenings, hide, conceal a message. There is a symbolism... No. 1 was the overpowering evil.” However, the actor adds, for good measure, “The last episode did not end. They all thought they got away... and my house was the same as it was in the beginning, with my car outside as promised. The door opened of its own accord, exactly as it had in the Village, with the same buzz. We never escaped.”

Unrepentant, McGoohan claims “You always have to have fantasy. You can get the other stuff from the headlines of newspapers.” As if to enforce his point, the actor includes at the end of the film an enigmatic vignette, casting himself, firstly strolling along a Californian beach carrying a stick. Beneath a pier he finds wire coat hangers, before appearing inside a clear-sided compartment of an external elevator on the side of a high building. He distinctly counts aloud the passing floors, six down to one. Next he crosses a footbridge, while the Beatles’ Come Together song is heard. Suddenly his body disappears from the structure and the star is back on the beach, perched on a camping stool, with the sea lapping about his shoes. The subject now draws coat hangers in the sand with the tip of his stick, the doodles being erased from the sand by each new rippling wave. On an impulse he strides into the sea, stating "I enjoyed every minute of it. Be seeing you." The image of the figure in the water merges with footage of No. 6 punching the air from The Prisoner, the implied message being that they were and are one and the same person.



McGoohan’s unnamed film was made 17 years after the 1966 Prisoner filming and twice that time has already passed since the so-called ‘L.A.’ Tape was turned down for screening. And yet, as the 50th anniversary of The Prisoner TV premiere approaches, the actor’s home-produced footage still represents the only time he has discussed so freely his landmark TV series, in depth and at length.

2016 new DVD of the ‘L.A.’ Tape – see: www.sixofone-escape.co.uk/escape-dvds.htm