



The Anthony/Izzard Partnership

THE BRIGHT THOUGHTS COMPANY

March 2021

- Independence Days -

Overture and beginners



In leaving home to seek my fortune - a bit of a Billy Elliot story for another northern lad - my story started when I went to Australia.

The performing arts scene was buzzing and it felt exciting to be part of it at such a tender age; I thought I'd never leave. My ballet teacher (an ex-principal of Australian Ballet) thought I had potential and that if I concentrated and put the work in, he'd get me in the corps de ballet in three years. My singing teacher also taught a number of the Australian Opera and he also said there was potential in me (at least I wasn't tone-deaf!). I believed I would continue to build a career in Australia and have no need to come back to the UK. Life was wonderful and

these were 'my people'. A friend who was an ASM at the Sydney Opera House would get us tickets to see people such as '*La Stupenda*' - **Joan Sutherland** and **Richard Bonyng**e for a number of extraordinary performances. All my friends were involved in the business in some way - who could ask for more?

I attended a symposium in Sydney with **Michael D. Edwards** (now an American Theatre Director) who at the time was like a soul-mate. We were fortunate to be with some fantastic famous people from the London scene who would be presenting at the event. What was fortunate for us is that as the event wasn't properly marketed it was poorly attended, and therefore we were able to hang-out with these wonderful people for about a week, to not only learn about their professions and careers, but also to socialise and to some degree start to build friendships. **Tim Rice** (lyricist), **Wendy Toye** (choreographer), **Stephen Oliver** (composer), and **Norman Newall** (record producer and writer of **Shirley Bassey** hits including '*Never, Never, Never*' and '*This Is My Life*'), among countless others.

I think it was Stephen who convinced me that I needed to perform on a West End stage in order to be taken seriously (anywhere in the world), even if I decide to come back to Aus later. We became good friends, to the point that he provided accommodation in his London flat for the first few months whilst I got sorted with suitable work and somewhere else to live. We remained good friends for the rest of his unbelievably short, tragic, and yet prolific life.

Back in England, Norman was genuinely hospitable with fun evenings, seeing some new show opened in the West End, the occasional weekend at his country mansion, and even offering to studio-test a soprano friend of mine whom I thought was talented and in need of a lucky break.

Act One - 'Boy Wonder' meets 'the Fat Controller'



Starting to understand my way around the West End, auditions, classes and agents, I got into shows and, importantly, got my full Equity Card. My inquisitiveness and thirst for new experience quickly got me into doing other things such as opera ballet and extra work at ENO, backing-dancer for **Sacha Distel** in his new BBC series, and being offered to tour Italy in a show which I jumped at, literally!

I loved the Italians and they loved me. When we were in Rome, at lunch-break (siesta time) I'd generally go off on my own rather than with the cast. Several times I remember just being able to wander into St Peter's, even the Sistine Chapel, where one could sit and contemplate in those days. Similarly,

when we were in Milan, I remember tracking down the *'Da Vinci Last Supper'* and, again, just wander in. I remember the floor being remarkably dusty and one could almost touch the masterpiece, there being no crowd control or barriers.

Returning to England to become one of the hundreds of 'jobbing performers' around the West End, I had to get my skates on as I was not content with being in the chorus and my character was too gregarious to do long runs. I needed to move rapidly to test the water elsewhere and do other things. When I did the daily dance class with **Arlene Phillips** it was obvious she was not going to use me in *Hot Gossip*, but it was exciting to be around at the time of the Kenny Everetts. I formed my own small dance troupe, secured a regular weekly gig at the Empire Ballroom, Leicester Square, where we specialised in 'electronica', and were the only dance troupe to perform exclusively to synthesised music, very much 'New Romantic'. I got noticed and the gig was my regular showcase.

We must have had a finger on the pulse as I did get mobbed from time to time by screaming girls and a few even wanted to start a fan club for me and my dance troupe! We were very much into the club scene, particularly the Blitz each Tuesday, the place where **Steve Strange**, **Spandau Ballet**, **Ultravox**, and **Boy George** to a large extent got started.

I was asked to perform at Southern TV in the 'exotica' of our New Romantics image and with synthesiser music-tracks. It was to be a live gig. On the dress rehearsal I noticed the camera lights were out of sequence and so I stopped dancing. After a few attempts of the Floor Manager to restart the number, I refused until I knew what was happening with cameras. The studio fell into silence as clearly there was 'hell' being screamed into the ear-pieces of the studio crew. The slam of the gallery door at the top of the studio gantry, footsteps onto the studio floor, and **'the fat controller'** as **Bryan Izzard** was often affectionately known (even by himself), came down to look me in the eye and saying *"We are on-air in forty minutes time, so are you prepared to ground Southern TV to halt over this silly little point?"* In the silence one could hear a pin drop as I replied, *"You bet, it's not your legs on camera! Wearing all this garb I know what works, how I need to look without coming across like a clown, ... and, it's what we did in rehearsal."* I got my way and the show went out live as planned and as originally rehearsed.

I was later told that no one got away with dealing with Bryan Izzard in that way, not only as director of the show but as Head of Entertainment. From then on, I was frequently referred to (mainly by Bryan) as **'boy wonder'** for many years.

Act Two - Best Foot Forward (Southern TV)



I was brought in to choreograph a regular Saturday evening show I think called *'The Trevor Baker All Weather Show'* usually with **Diane Langton** as the resident singer, directed by Bryan each week.

Another staging job was the *Worzel Gummidge Scarecrow Dance* with **Una Stubbs** and **John Pertwee**, and I was so concerned about it being a success. Afterwards I received a personal letter of thanks from **James Hill** (director and producer), so it must have worked!

I started doing lots of other work at Southern which didn't necessarily involve music. *'Take a Letter Mr Jones'* a sit-com with **John Inman** and **Rula Lenska**, *'Under Manning'* a gameshow with **Bernard Manning**, and **Charles Collingwood** (Brian Aldridge character in *The Archers*), *'Royle Progress'* with **Roger Royle**, among others.

The early days with Bryan were often 'stormy'. Clearly, he thought I had fresh ideas and a new way of doing things which had some degree of merit in challenging the norm. However, I was told repeatedly to understand the grammar of making television "*learn the craft*" before trying to break the rules, then we might be getting somewhere!

It seemed I was somehow 'accepted' as part of the 'inner circle', so to speak, I think largely because they knew I was dependable, could be thrown into almost anything - not just song and dance - be trusted to deliver and make it happen. I particularly liked assisting in edit suites, and also on the studio floor, if the union reps would allow me to. My inquisitive mind would be constantly buzzing and also coming up with new ideas to then throw at Bryan's, as he was after all Head of Entertainment and I (naively) thought I was helping out.

As Bryan and I always seemed to have so much to discuss and talk about, planning ideas and productions, rehearsals, schedules for the coming weeks, sometimes the easiest thing seemed to be to visit the family home where discussions could happen at a more leisurely pace, without interruption or distraction. On weekends in Abinger Hammer, more often than not we'd meet **Harry Rabinowitz** (conductor) for a drink or visit his home. Harry was later to be the Musical Director and conductor of all our shows which involved orchestra.

We'd dine out with **Jeremy Wallington** (Director of Programmes) fairly regularly, a good way for me to understand what happens at a more executive level. And, in due course, the day started to loom when Southern had to reapply for the franchise within the ITV network.

For the night of the big IBA decision and their announcement, I was told to not put anything in my diary. The 'three-line whip' went out!

One way or another, we were going to be dining at Jeremy's table. If Southern had the franchise renewed we would be celebrating and preparing to make some significant changes to the schedules and quite a number of our ideas would likely go into development. If the franchise was not renewed, it would be Plan B, Jeremy would focus more on Southern Films and also developing a new independent studio in the new Docklands development (later to be called Limehouse Studios), and Bryan and I would form The Bright Thoughts Company and see if we could flog a few concepts to the 'soon-to-be' Channel 4.

Act Three - Above The Station



We had a peculiar address to find opposite Harrod's, the temporary office for Channel 4, long before building their first offices. We thought we'd try and sell one of our ideas to **Cecil Koror**, Commissioning Editor for Entertainment, one of the first appointees.

Meeting **Jeremy Isaacs** for the first time, we were both nervous, but we came out of that meeting not with one commission but four, the first two being '*Max Miller*' and '*Macready!*' These were the very first entertainment commissions by Channel 4. We were in a state of shock, to the extent of having to find the nearest bar and it wasn't even lunchtime!

During the next year there was the winding-down of all commitments to Southern, and the cranking-up of the new Bright Thoughts commissions. Amongst this, as Southern had 'discovered' a new soprano called **Julia Migenes**, Bryan had been invited to direct a prime-time Christmas Special starring Julia for the German TV network, to be recorded live in front of an audience in Heidelberg Cathedral. I went out to help and work on the show, I met Julia for the first time which was huge fun, and not the typical soprano I was otherwise used to working with.

It seemed obvious that if we weren't able to work with Julia at Southern, we could sell the idea to Channel 4 as hardly anyone in the UK had heard of her and this would be the perfect vehicle to launch in this country. The project concept was later to be titled *Top C's & Tiaras*.

At this time, my flat was in the roof in the actual building over Goodge Street Station (and the ticket hall) which meant our front door was between the entrance and exit of the station. Little did I know at the time that high above Tottenham Court Road, looking out of my bedroom and bathroom windows would be the view to the back of Charlotte Street, right where the offices of Channel 4 were to be built. How convenient for business production meetings, not too far to travel! It also seemed prudent, for the first year or so at least, to use my flat as our production office so that we wouldn't have to incur much expense whilst we were discovering whether or not Bright Thoughts was going to work or not. Sometimes it was utter chaos cramming everyone in when we were actually in production and certainly the first few shows were all managed from there.

We did need strong back-up in these early days to help get on-track. **Roger Hancock** (brother of the legendary Tony Hancock) agreed to be our agent with **Denton, Hall & Burgin** our solicitors.

With most of our shows having some degree of music content, to our good fortune the wonderful (and endlessly patient) **Burt Rhodes** - who had an astonishing career working with countless distinguished and legendary artists including **Judy Garland**, and been also the Musical Director at *The Talk of The Town* for many years - came to work for Bright Thoughts on most of our shows. As a Music Associate along with **Harry Rabinowitz** to conduct our orchestras and be a Musical Director when we needed one, our music team was rock-solid.

It was an unwritten understanding with Channel 4 that the Bright Thoughts 'bread and butter' would be the one-man shows due to C4 having small budgets and yet needing to provide entertainment that wouldn't appear on the other channels. We had the confidence of being able to work with strong, dependable actors (such as **John Bardon** in *Max Miller*) and writers (such as **Alan Plater**

'*On Your Way Riley*'), and that shooting in small theatres we could deliver on budget with a relatively quick turn-around.

This enabled us to then spend a bit more time preparing more elaborate productions to deliver bigger viewing figures and be popular. It was not by chance the first *Top C's Special* was a hit; we had worked on the idea with Julia in Germany and prepared the project in the days of Southern. We knew the formula worked, we just needed Channel 4 to gain confidence and make a proper commitment once they'd been on air for a while and got over their teething problems.

Andy Park (Commissioning Editor for Music) was great fun to work with and work for, and always an interesting challenge; more often than not he presented us with a project we'd not thought of - and usually stretched us artistically and creatively. We knew they wouldn't be money-spinners but always rewarding to do for artistic reasons. Andy knew his stuff!

Comedy was another area I was keen we should develop, comedy in its new form. I had spent countless Saturday evenings being entertained by vibrant, fresh stand-up - particularly the Comedy Store - by the early **Alexei Sayle, Rik Mayall** and **Ade Edmonson, Nigel Planer, French & Saunders, Ben Elton, Arnold Brown, Jim Barclay** and others.

I was desperate for Bryan to see what I saw in the freshness and the quick-witted vibrancy of this new generation, my generation. It still saddens me that he couldn't really make that leap; it was clear that his masterful directorial style of sit-com production ('*On The Buses*', '*Please Sir*') belonged now to a past generation. I was never completely happy with our comedy output.

We had a major row over **Ben Elton** whom I got on with and worked easily with and whose razor-sharp wit and intelligence I had great admiration for. From our first meeting, it was plain Ben was destined for bigger things, particularly as a writer. I seriously liked the idea of working more with him but, in the one Bright Thoughts show which Ben performed in, Bryan cut him out of the show entirely and for no obvious or justifiable reason. To this day, it is a deep regret and I believe Ben is owed an apology from Bryan.

Act Four - Between Diamonds and The Real Thing



Without proper offices we were bursting at the seams, and as it was evident we had established ourselves and Bright Thoughts as a brand, turnover looked consistent and stable enough for a commercial mortgage.

The ideal solution was to keep things modest yet flexible, so we bought three flats in the same block in Soho - one flat for the office, another for Bryan, and a third for me - on the basis that when we were in production that both of us would give one of our rooms over to the production for that period. In my flat, for example, Christopher Frederick (Production Manager and Accountant) would use my study, in Bryan's the piano would also be there for routing and some basic rehearsals.

This would also save on hiring other space. When not in production, just the office would be used for day-to-day business, secretary, PA, and meetings.

With the hustle and bustle of Soho, often people had difficulty in finding our front door. Having moved it was now a single door between two clubs, one called '*The Real Thing*', the other

'Diamonds' ... and for some other people they may remember it better as three doors down from *'Prowler'*, or indeed directly opposite *'Madame Jo Jo's'*.

Whilst we were now able to take on bigger projects, look at developing co-productions and breaking into different markets so that we'd be less dependent on Channel 4 and in fact actually help them out more by not having to fund a project 100% but pick up the UK element of projects which could also be marketed in other territories. We'd also be able to put more into our research.

These were amusing times, particularly when they forgot to let us know we were making a show for them. Once they announced to the press we were going to produce our *'George Formby'* along with *'WC Fields'* (we had too much on to do Formby at that time). Another time we were seated in the audience of the viewing theatre for their press launch of the autumn schedule to hear the announcement of a comedy series by Bright Thoughts, ... all very nice but huge public embarrassment as we were amongst the press and having to give comments about a show we didn't know we were making. They'd forgotten to tell us! Outside the press room it precipitated an argument between Bryan and me. He accused me of doing secret deals with C4 without telling him, and I was accusing him of the same.

Our heated discussion couldn't last for long, as we realised it was their mess-up. We had to cobble together a wild idea for a weekly show that would go into production immediately "yesterday" (which fulfils the expectation of this announcement) with a budget that wasn't even a shoestring, more a piece of thread, and also have topical 'edgy' humour about weekly events. *'Interference'* was not our finest hour, but given that we had to drop absolutely everything to start churning out a weekly topical show on a budget which almost amounted to petty cash, we did pretty-damn-good, and saved face for C4. It was fun if one could enter the spirit, so to speak.

When we started to see the cracks appearing in C4, at first we thought it was simply teething problems but it became progressively clear they were more like a dysfunctional family.

Our operetta project was a stark example. We developed the concept whilst at Southern and working with Julia in Germany. C4 wanted a ratings hit (their viewer figures were low) and we tailored Top C's to deliver just that. The assigned programme accountants to the show hacked the budgets to the quick and cut our professional fees and production fees on the basis of ***'bread today, jam tomorrow'***,

The 'jam tomorrow' was both implicit and explicit inasmuch as the production budget allowed for the main series to be simultaneously sound-recorded on digital tape so that we could edit and remaster independently to video and to be used for different purposes. In other words for the sound-mix for Channel 4 transmission we did a 'lay-back to VTR' edition designed to be listened to through the small speaker of the average TV set. Other higher quality and more sophisticated sound-mixes were held for the secondary marketing and for different media including CD.

The Channel 4 Annual Report ('84) boasts ***"Top C's and Tiaras (Bright Thoughts) won the channel's most enthusiastic response by phone and letter for its stylish rediscovering of the middle ground of operetta with Julia Migenes Johnson."*** In the later book by Jeremy Isaacs he goes on to say ***"though made on a shoestring, they went down a treat with fans. But they could not be a call on our air-time week in week out, I thought. Other priorities claimed our limited space. But some day, on radio or television, someone should cater, day in day out, for the neglected middlebrow."***

The 'jam tomorrow' part of the arrangement we expected to come from the marketing in the years ahead - whether it be done in-house or out-sourced - never materialised. We later learned that because C4 also cut the **Richard Price Associates'** commission down to the quick, Price could really only afford to market products which were often described as ***'the low hanging fruit'*** i.e.

shows that are easy to place. When C4 took their marketing back in-house, by this time Top C's was conveniently dropped. One way or another, C4 had failed in delivering their part of the bargain. No jam! The show had served their purpose then, frankly, it was dumped. It was not offered elsewhere and we were not offered it back.

It's of little surprise that **Peter Morrison** and **Marilyn Hill-Smith** went their own way and recorded their own spin-offs from the show.

Bryan regularly said jokingly this or that person would be in his memoirs and the joke was always whether 'that person' would be worthy of a page or a chapter in his book to be titled "**Screwed Again and Loving it!**"

We knew it was unhealthy - and dangerous - to supply only one customer, otherwise, why be independent? Why not get a staff job somewhere and reap all the benefits of more standard hours, bigger salaries, holidays, pension, and union protection to some degree? From the outset we intended to develop co-production partners. In theory, this would also benefit C4 as they could have the UK rights without necessarily bearing the greater costs of origination and production.

Our first attempt at co-production was with the newly formed **RKO Nederlander** (RKO Pictures with the Nederlander theatre group) who wanted to break into the new emerging markets particularly in Europe, and with the televising and the new video marketing of theatre-based or performance-based shows. The Molière farces of '*Sganarelle*' was to be our pilot project with RKO Nederlander from which there would likely be many other titles we would collaborate on. Unfortunately the Molière turned out to be more a tragedy than a farce.

The C4 involvement (as I recall) was via the acquisition route and not a direct commission and yet they insisted on having a high level of editorial input and control. They wanted something 'edgy' and shot in a more radical way to suit the style of this new UK channel rather than the more traditional reportage methods (i.e. cameras and direction). Caught in the middle of a difference in editorial style and preference, it turned out to be irreconcilable. The nett result was the show being 'hidden' on a late slot in the UK that hardly anyone would watch and that was the end of the Bright Thoughts working relationship with RKO Nederlander.

Our other route to find co-production partners was in originating our own projects, and this would likely mean investment in research and development in order to bring the concept to maturity, a level where it would be attractive to investors/partners. '*The History of the Chorus Girl*' was always planned that way and we first sold the idea to Channel 4 at the very first meeting we had in their temporary office opposite Harrods.

Each year we got a little closer and tried to do a bit more research whenever we were visiting another country or in whatever precious downtime there might have been. The interest of Channel 4 did not wane but with our production fees on other shows still being hacked to the bone we had no money to invest in the research required. We almost got there with the help of **Goldcrest**, but it still needed a firm commitment for the proposal to be brought to fruition, marketed as a serious contender for investment, and then to produce and re-edit in different formats for worldwide distribution. We never earned enough money to allow the luxury to step back and take stock, research and develop fresh ideas, new partners, new markets.

Rather than stimulating and enabling independent production in the UK, in hindsight the concept of our being pioneers was delusional, we were exploited to the hilt and then disregarded as unimportant once the political wind changed.

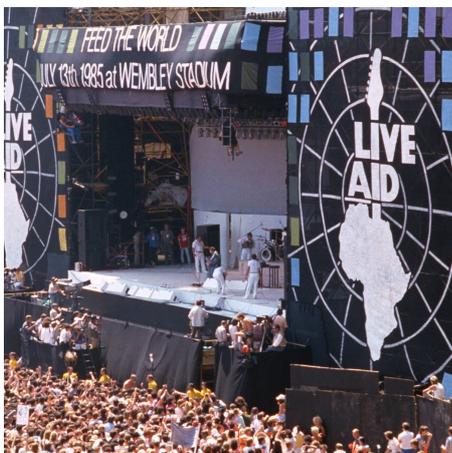
Figuratively speaking, the neck of a goose-laying-golden-eggs was indeed being progressively strangled. Poor fees, production budgets cut to the quick, no room for profit and investment.

Failure to market the 80% of our product which was performance-based and had not reached 'Sell-by Dates' somehow didn't seem to matter or concern them. Increasingly, these issues of 'bad faith' deepened, they became overwhelming and made things untenable.

Bryan and I had agreed the Bright Thoughts product would always be our creative partnership and if the fun were to ever go out of our collaboration then we'd 'call it a day'.

We discussed the possibility of getting investment into the company or indeed merging with a larger production company so that we could focus more on our larger co-production ideas. Neither of us liked the idea of moving more into the boardroom as we both preferred being hands-on working together on all projects at the coalface.

Reprise



It's not entirely true to say that Bryan and I went our separate ways but I had reached 'burnout' and needed a bit of 'air', some relief from the TV industry, particularly Channel 4, and to take stock.

Soon after taking a back seat, I was given some 'comp tickets' for **Live Aid** and to spend the entire day in the artists' enclosure with the performers for the duration of the most extraordinary concert I've ever been to. Hugely privileged to be around the elite, **Bowie, Elton, U2, Quo, Dire Straits, Phil Collins, Roger Daltrey, Brian Ferry**, and others. From my clubbing days - the Blitz and 'electronica' - **Spandau, Ultravox, Boy George, George Michael**, we were of similar age and I couldn't help but contrast how they'd committed to

the music industry whereas I went the TV direction. Had I made the right choice? Could I change direction again perhaps with less of a 'strait-jacket'?

Or did I just want a quiet life for a while? We knew **Freddie Mercury** was HIV+ and he clearly knew this when performing at Live Aid. Shortly afterwards, I was also shocked on hearing my friend **Derek Jarman** announcing he had developed AIDS. Then the thunderbolt, **Stephen Oliver** rang to say he also was HIV+. Around that time my mother had also died suddenly and to some extent I was still in mourning. Far too many people I care about dying, far too young.

A change of direction was now in order - less of a rollercoaster and less opportunistic - at least until Bryan and I could find space to dream up some new ideas, bring the fun back, and not be compelled to churn-out programmes just to sustain a commercial mortgage. Wrong priorities!

Bryan is also on record as saying *"I got to the stage as a independent where I was working mostly for either accountants or lawyers, so I listed to Patrick Dromgoole when he offered me the opportunity to come into HTV"* (as the new Head of Entertainment).

We met up fairly regularly either to see a show or perhaps spend the weekend at the family home in Abinger and exchange ideas on each other's project. We were in agreement that our friendship and creative relationship was far more important than Channel 4 and it was of far greater value.

Bryan would advise me particularly when I was putting a new charity together, project-managing, developing fundraising strategies, and the like. In taking on something important I'd seek his views, for example when I'd been asked to regularly attend one of the All-Party Parliamentary

Groups (as I don't really enjoy politics), and at other times when meeting significant public figures (including royalty), and also being presented with awards as I was never comfortable.

Equally, Bryan would use me as a sounding-board for whatever he was cooking elsewhere. At HTV I would visit to do some work 'informally' on whatever he was producing at that time and stay in the family home now in Weston-super-Mare and make a 'working holiday' out of the trip as it nearly always involved doing some recces, location hunting, or research of some kind.

I worked on the **Ivor Gurney** project and we started to develop a few more plans again including '**Navvies**' as we shared an interest in industrial archaeology, Bryan in steam engines and particularly Brunel, I in the canal system and watermills.

Over the years, Bryan as a Director was contracted to do some **South Bank Shows** annually for LWT and **Melvyn Bragg**. I sometimes assisted in a minor way, formally or informally, including **Riverdance**, **Elaine Paige**, **James Galway**, **Indian Festival of Light** (Diwali), **Sir Peter Maxwell Davies**.

See you in the bar

One day years later I got a call to meet for lunch at LWT with Bryan, I presumed to catch up, and I thought he might be having some issues with the current show he wanted to share. And, whilst that might have been the case, it was alarming to see he'd lost 10 stone in weight and was now with a walking stick as some toes had been amputated due to diabetes.

Whilst we tried to keep the conversation jolly, he was saying "*We've had a good run*" to which I replied, "*Nonsense, we're going to get you back on-form,*" and I made sure he knew I was there for him and promised to stay in touch more regularly.

I jokingly asked, "By the way, when are your memoirs coming out, have you found a publisher for '*Screwed Again and Loving It*'? Do I get a signed first edition copy and, have you sold the rights?"

That was the last time we met, he died a few months later. I'm sure he didn't want people around as my messages didn't get a reply. Sadly, I was not there for the last curtain call.

Applause and end credits



Also greatly missed, **Jeremy Wallington**, **Roger Hancock** and **Cecil Korner** among others who played a significant role in the Anthony/Izzard collaboration, providing support to make it and help keep us on the rails.

The banter and camaraderie of **Burt Rhodes** and **Harry Rabinowitz** are also fondly remembered.

Curating the catalogue is part of their legacy as well as Bryan's. The portfolio of concepts and projects as yet still unplaced and may one day come to fruition. The tribute to **Stephen Oliver** and celebration of his music legacy to us all is also long overdue.

It is encouraging to receive renewed interest in the Bright Thoughts product, potentially in the remastering for new media which simply didn't exist at the time of production. It is also heartening to hear from artists who have some association with the shows, their expressed interest to potentially get involved perhaps in a retrospective or new reinterpretation.

"Stand by studio, first positions please. Maestro!"

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Neil Anthony, Bright Thoughts Company
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