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AN ENIGMA COMES TO AMERICAN TV

Patrick McGoochan's new series has already puzzled—and enraged—British viewers

By Joan Barthel

To a jazz beat, the custom sports car races through the streets of London, pulls up before a looming, ominous building. The handsome fellow at the wheel leaps out, strides inside, slaps a letter of resignation down on a desk. Without a word he strides out, leaps into the car and roars away.

Back in his bachelor pad, he is packing to go away on holiday when his look of grimly pleased achievement suddenly fades, he raises his head suspiciously, his eyes narrow. Gas is seeping in under the door. Fade-out. When he wakes up he is in a strange house in a very strange village. He has become "The Prisoner."

The retaliation may seem a bit extreme, even for the most crotchety employer to take. But this is no routine employer; this is the Government. This is no routine handsome fellow; this is Patrick McGoochan, wanting out of his intelligence-agent job. And this is no routine British whodunit, but a controversial TV series that brought screams of anguish and dismay when it was shown in England this past season, a series that comes to CBS on June 1 as an offbeat summer replacement for *The Jackie Gleason Show*.

The screams came from viewers and critics enraged at the enigma of it all. The village—a color-splashed,

fairyland place with flowery courtyards, ivied turrets, noble statuary and gushing fountains—is identified only as the Village, containing such elements as the Cafe, the Restaurant, the Hospital, the Palace of Fun, the Graveyard and surrounded by the Mountains and the Sea. The characters are identified only by number: McGoochan is Number Six, his most

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annoying captor is the powerful Number Two, and the behind-scenes brain is Number One, the most mysterious of all.

"He has no idea who has abducted him," says the publicity booklet for the series. "They could be his own people. They could be enemies. Perhaps both. And he has no idea where he is, except that the compound is a

completely self-contained village. It could be anywhere in the world, and there is no way of knowing."

Actually, there is. You find Patrick McGoohan.

Brown's Hotel in London is one of those elderly, noble, very British places where the elevator creaks, the chambermaid will tuck a hot-water →



bottle under your blanket on a wintry night, and in place of a lobby there is a parlor with a fireplace and cozy corners for tea and discreet conversation. Only in place of tea, McGoochan drank Scotch; and in place of discreet conversation, there was a discerning monolog.

It was a monolog mainly because of McGoochan's forceful personality and firm ideas. The firmness is reflected in his rule of 15 minutes, maximum, for interviews—although TV Gumb was excepted; in his decree that his personal life and surroundings need not concern the press—thus the rendezvous in Brown's parlor; and in his ability to mold a television program in his own image and likeness (in his previous series, *Secret Agent*, he changed a character whom the authors had conceived in the suave, sexy shadow of James Bond into a sterling type who never carried a gun or kissed a girl).

Now the firmness is reflected with full finality in *The Prisoner*. Although some associates from the *Secret Agent* days are said to have huddled with him on the idea, it is very much McGoochan's series; Lew Grade of Associated Television gave him a big budget and a free hand, and McGoochan has been the program's part-time director and scriptwriter as well as its full-time executive producer and star.

Even Michael Dann, senior vice president of programming for CBS, couldn't budge a firm McGoochan. Dann saw the pilot in London last year, liked it, and suggested that *The Prisoner* might qualify for a regular-season slot if a change were made in conception; that is, if Number Six could be made less of a loser. "From a production point of view I thought *The Prisoner* was the most extraordinary film I'd ever seen," said Dann. "It has style, taste, quality, and it's quite sophisticated. But I told him that no matter how brilliant the pro-

duction, the public likes to identify with a winner. He listened to me—he gave me a very understanding ear—but he was dedicated to this concept and I didn't win my point."

What to Dann was "dedication" was, to another observer, "stubbornness, intolerance"; and to an interviewer was a fascinating example of a strong will at work, determining the direction the talk was to take, reluctantly confirming that the series was filmed in the village of Portmeirion in Wales, but diverting other questions about the series' secrets into abrupt cul-de-sacs, with "I don't know" or "I certainly don't wish to talk about that now." Nevertheless, he was not irritating but intriguing. While he shrugs off an overly metaphysical interpretation of the series—"It would be a grave error to pretend that this is anything other than a piece of entertainment of a certain type"—he intends there should be something more there than meets the casual eye.

"I've always been obsessed with the idea of prisons in a liberal democratic society. I believe in democracy, but the inherent danger is that with an excess of freedom in all directions we will eventually destroy ourselves.

"You take a great nation like the United States of America and you find it's run on opinion polls. It's an incredible situation! The poll investigator goes through a general cross section of the public—butchers, bakers, candlestick makers—and asks them how they think the war in Vietnam should be conducted. The opinions are put into a computer and out comes 49 percent of the people think the war should be conducted in this way, 38 percent another way, and so on. Well, these people may be very good butchers and bakers and candlestick makers, but I can't believe they know enough about the political and psychological situation to say how the war should be conducted.

"The reason we're so concerned →

with these polls is that we're so desperately concerned with saying, 'We're free!' And I want to know, how free are we? I think we're being imprisoned and engulfed by a scientific and materialistic world. We're at the mercy of gadgetry and gimmicks; I'm making my living out of a piece of gadgetry, which is a television set, and anyone who says there aren't any pressures in it has never watched a commercial."

He has made a very good living indeed from television, particularly from the spy series, which was so successful in its initial half-hour version (then titled *Danger Man*) in the early 1960's that it was later reborn in hour-long format and, as *Secret Agent*, carried in a prime-time, regular-season niche on CBS. Before TV, he had some fame but very little fortune from his work on the British stage. He began in the theater as a stagehand, worked his way up in repertory, and by 1959 was so highly regarded that he was nominated by British newspaper critics for "best stage actor" (for an Ibsen role).

His personal background was no easier. He was born in New York in 1928 of Irish parents who emigrated back when he was still quite young. Later the family moved to England, and he quit school in his teens to work in a mill, then a bank, then as a farmer, before turning to the theater.

Now the McGoohans—wife (actress Joan Drummond) and daughters (Catherine, Anne and Frances)—live in Mill Hill, which he calls "a little hamlet village" in the green belt around London. Only occasionally, "out of great pressure," does he come into the mechanized, computerized city. "Computers have everything worked out for us. And we're constantly being numeralized. The other day I went through the number of units that an ordinary citizen over here is subject to, including license

plate numbers and all the rest, and it added up to some 340 separate digits."

Not coincidentally, the prisoner's most impassioned line in the first episode is directed at Number Two's attempt to pigeonhole him. "I will not be pushed, filed, indexed, briefed or numbered. I am not a number. I am a person!" (Number Two dismisses the appeal. "It's six of one, half-a-dozen of the other," he says, and eventually Number Six gets his identity card, health card, credit card, work permit card, et al.)

But whatever the overtones, whether or not *The Prisoner* is an elaborate parable of modern man caged in an automated society, McGoohan insists that the series' basic premise is not all that farfetched.

"What do you do with defectors, or with people who have top-secret knowledge of the highest order and who, for one reason or another, want out? Do you shoot them?"

"I know there are places where these people are kept. Not voluntarily, and in absolute luxury. There are three in this country—let someone deny it! I know about them because I know someone who used to be associated with the service.

"I used the secret-agent thing as a launching pad and the numeralization thing as a progression," he said briskly, matter-of-factly. "And now I just hope there are a couple of thoughts in it somewhere that relate to the things that are going on around us, to our situation at the moment. It will be interesting to see what viewers think the symbols are. I will say this: There are, within it, answers to every single question that can be posed, but one can't expect an answer on a plate, saying, 'Here you are; you don't have to think; it's all yours; don't use your brain.'"

No matter what those answers, here, at least, is a summertime show that acknowledges that there may actually be questions. END