

# DONT LOOK BACK IN A GRANADA: THE SWEENEY

By

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Da-da. Da-da. Da-de-da-da-da-da-da-dah-dah.

Oh what bliss it was to be alive when Thames TV first broadcast that clarion call to cop-show fans everywhere.

It introduced the first episode of The Sweeney on 2nd January 1975 with an episode called Ringer guest starring Brian Blessed, co-incidentally one of the early stars of Z-Cars, which itself was dying a death on BBC 1 at the same time. What a start to the new year! And what a start to the best TV police procedural ever, although if that was police procedure in the seventies then God save us all. But of course half the fun was that it wasn't authentic, at least we didn't think it was. Later revelations showed us that maybe it was closer to the truth than we ever imagined, which might indicate why we're in the mess we're in now.

At the time, it seemed that The Sweeney was going to change British TV cop shows for ever. And it almost did. It teetered on the edge, but in the end it all came back to The Midsotner Murders as in our heart of hearts we knew it would. Nothing that good could ever last.

But for a few glorious years....

But that wasn't the first we'd seen of that particular section of the thin blue line. Regan was a one-off eighty minute film in the Armchair Cinema strand shown on 4th June 1974 at 8.30pm. John Thaw played Detective-Inspector Jack Regan. The most rambunctious, boozing, birding, thin line walking copper since...

Well there never was one. Not in the UK anyway.

The show had an audience of over seven million and on the strength of it another thirteen episodes were commissioned to be called The Sweeney after the cockney rhyming slang Sweeney Todd - Flying Squad. All in all Euston Films made a further fifty-three episodes, the final one being aired over the Christmas holidays in 1978. So historically The Sweeney embraced Glam Rock, Punk, Star Wars, The Queen's Silver Jubilee and the death of the old Labour party.

Most of the characters from Regan were reprised in the series including George Carter, Regan's ever loyal skipper (Detective-Sergeant). Carter was played by Dennis Waterman. The two actors fitted together on screen like fish and chips, scotch and Coke, cheese on toast. They just worked, and every bloke wanted a mate like they were mates, one who was ready to pile in, no questions asked, watch your back and lie in their teeth to get you out of bother.

So what else was so important about The Sweeney?

Well, you've got to remember that as it was being shown so was Dixon Of Dock Green. Yeah, it's hard to imagine, but old George was walking the same mean streets of London as Regan and Carter right up until 1976. Doesn't bear thinking about does it?

So apart from anything else, it blew shows like that old chestnut right out of the water, born as it was out of Public Eye, Callan and Special Branch. And allowed others like Gangsters and Target to be made. And it was all on film, not like so many other shows at the time with bits of film interspersed with video. And the sound was recorded on line, on location so that even the audio sounded authentic. Just like the writers wanted it to be. Writers like Ian and Troy Kennedy Martin, Trevor Preston and Tony Hoare amongst others. And what writing. Not for them the clumsy caution that the actors in The Bill and other police shows have to use now. Just "Get your trousers on, you're nicked," and back to the station for a well earned scotch from the bottle hidden in the bottom desk drawer.

That old scotch bottle was one of the many props that were as important in their way as the stars and the script.

First the clothes. Flares. massive, elephant sized flares over clumpy, high heeled, platform soled boots with zips up the sides. And jackets with Concorde sized lapels, kipper ties, long shirt collar points either penny-round or pointed. But no button-downs or tabs. That was ten years ago mod, and wouldn't come back into fashion for ten more. The shirts were form fitting then, with sleeves so narrow that they cut the skin on the inside of your elbows, and viciously, button-poppingly pleated at the back no matter how big a gut they exposed. And watching The Sweeney now it seems that not many actors had a gym regime in those days. And there was lots of suede about, but we don't talk about that.

You may laugh now, but at the time these guys were the cutting edge of fashion, the epitome of cool and young men all over the country wanted to emulate them and some of us did. I did, and made a bloody fool of myself more than once.

Then there were the motors. Never cars - always motors, or occasionally wheels. The plain clothes drove Fords. Consuls, Granadas and Coke bottle Cortinas. The uniforms, or woodentops as Regan described them had Mk 1 Escorts and Rovers mostly with the odd Allegro thrown in to make our mouths water. The villains drove anything from flash Yanks in all colours of the rainbow, Rollers, Triumph Stags, Range Rovers. Almost anything expensive. But of course their favourites, and the favourites to be wrecked in some puddle jumping, fence wrecking chase through the wilds of the then still derelict docklands were beautiful S-Type Jaguars. No wonder they're so expensive now as the property master must've bought job lots of them cheap and wrecked them wholesale. Nobody wanted them then, once again it would be ten years before they came back into fashion as yuppie classics.

And guns.

Blimey, they handed them out like sweets in those days. The cops used short barrelled revolvers and the bad guys... Well take your pick. Shotguns, sawn-off and full length. Rifles. Machine guns, semi-automatics. Anything that would shoot in fact, and shoot them they did. The armourer must've spent a fortune on blank ammunition.

As much props as the above were the birds. Lynda Bellingham (The OXO mum) as a dolly bird.

Linda La Plante (Award winning TV writer and producer) as a dolly bird. Geraldine James (Band Of Gold) as a dolly bird.

Lesley Ann Down (Upstairs, Downstairs) as a dolly bird. And loads of other actresses who now have a few years and more dignity on them, whose faces you know but names you wouldn't recognise, as dolly-birds. With the shortest mini skirts you've ever seen.

But not Ally McBeal Lycra-tight minis. More flared like the trousers and more easily accessible as lots of boys found out around then.

And what boys they were.

Probably the most memorable were George Layton and Patrick Mower as a homo-erotic pair of heisters from Australia. They appeared in a couple of episodes charming their way round London, and in the first actually got away from the long arm of the law.

Of course much of the fun now is spotting future stars, and there were plenty of them to spot. Including what looks like half the cast of the early EastEnders, most of Only Fools And Horses and even refugees from Crossroads. It was a British luvvie fest. John Hurt; Ian Hendry; Warren Mitchell; Warren Clarke; Bill Maynard; Michael Elphick; Maurice Rooves and dozens more shrugged on donkey jackets and Doc Martens and foolishly took on Regan and Carter only to end up dead, or eating Her Majesty's porridge. And never forget Harry South's music.

The main theme for the opening credits to which little kids could soon be heard singing "Swee-nee, swee-nee," and the wonderfully mournful end credit music.

Time's verdict on the show can be harsh. It's accused of being amongst other things, sexist, homophobic and racist. And it almost certainly is, at least by new millennium standards. Things were different twenty-five years ago and although we appear to have defeated this trio of prejudices, is life any better for minorities now than it was then? I somehow doubt it. It just appears that way to the chattering classes so that they can sleep safer in their beds. Overly violent was another charge. And it's true they were. Never have punches been so amplified and never have baseball bats been wielded with such enthusiasm. I've even heard a rumour that Channel 5 censored some scenes when they recently repeated the show. It seems strange that in this so called free society of ours nanny always knows best. They used to try to change history by burning books, now they chop up old TV series. But let's not get too serious. At the core of The Sweeney there was always a big element of comedy.

Hence Ronnie Fraser as Titus Oates in Series 3, Diana Dors as the terrifying Mrs Rix in Series 4, and Morecombe and Wise, in the final episode ever made, though not the last one shown, which in fact was a sad epitaph for what had once been the toughest show on British TV.

There were also two films made for the cinema, but in my opinion the less said about them the better.

So to some of us it will always be the Seventies and we'll look back with fondness to a low-rise London, Take-6 Suits, Blue Nun, Capri Gias, and of course The Sweeney.

I miss it. I think I'm going to go home and dig out a Sweeney video.

For more Sweeney related information, check out:

Fags, Slags, Blags & Jags: The Sweeney Mike Kenwood & George Williams Uslag Press- £9.99

Shut it!-A Fan's Guide To 70's Cops On The Box Martin Day & Keith Topping-Virgin Books- £6.99