20 Questions for John Simm

The Railway Arms *Life On Mars* Message Board – January 2007

It's my pleasure to announce that the extremely kind John Simm has offered to answer 20 questions from the members of TRA! Please think long and hard about your question, and try to make it something original that you haven't seen asked before (i.e. not about the memories of the 70s! hehe!)

They don't have to be about LoM if you have another project or aspect you would like to ask about. Also, John has requested that we don't ask about his involvement in Ashes to Ashes, as he can confirm that he is not going to be involved in the show.

Hello everybody.

Nice questions! Please forgive the length of time it's gonna take me to get through them all, i'm not great at typing! So i'll keep coming back and will eventually get 'em all answered. Before we start... the answer is 'Boxers', Ducky. *[This is in response to a joking comment by Ducky in another thread about whether to ask the 'boxers or briefs' question.]*

I'm sure you're excited about getting Magic Alex's music out to the public next month and also about the second season of *Life on Mars*, so all things considering these days (without money being an object!) what would you rather be holding in your hands... a sweet sounding guitar or a well written script?

These days i would rather be holding a well written script. Family to feed! Also, well written scripts are very rare, and to be honest i've hardly played guitar since the band split 2 years ago.

You spent the first part of your career playing conflicted teens and angry young men. Is there a role that you view as the one that allowed you to break the stereotype?

I suppose the roles that broke the 'conflicted teen/angry young man' thing were Human Traffic and Wonderland. (which, incidentally, is my favourite of all the movies i've done. Regardless of my performance, i just think Wonderland is a great film)

We know you as an actor and musician, do you have any plans to work behind the camera, in a directorial or writing capacity?

I would like to direct a film. I was going to direct an ep of LOM for this series, but it soon became apparent that the workload would be impossible. In fact, having witnessed first hand the pressure involved in directing a TV show like this, it's put me off directing on television for good!

Since they just released the images of Sam and Gene as Camberwick Green figures, what's it like to see yourself in puppet form?

I think the puppets are great. Me and Phil watched the clip together for the first time and we honestly just fell about laughing. I like the fact they've very simple but you can tell exactly who they are supposed to be. They gave us a framed pic of them when we finished, and we are both very honoured to be Camberwick green puppets!

Running TRA, I was wondering if anything you've been in so far has had the same sort of fan reaction (forums, communities, icons and graphics etc), or if *Life on Mars* has been the first that has expanded in this sort of way?

The fan reaction to LOM has been overwhelming to tell the truth. The nearest thing i can think of is the reaction to Human Traffic, which eventually stopped me going clubbing. (which was a good thing!) But i've never done anything as mainstream as this, so the reaction shocked me. But in a good way...!

Out of all of your acting work, which was your favorite role and why?

My favourite role was 'Raskolnikov' in "Crime and punishment". I hope the Beeb will one day release it on dvd! It's my favourite book, so it was a dream come true to play him.

Other than that, i have a soft spot for 'Danny' in 'The Lakes. As you can tell, i like 'em dark! Also, i cant remember ever enjoying my job as much as i did whilst playing 'Van Gogh'.

So, probably those 3. (sorry, Sam fans!)

What intrigued you about the role of Sam Tyler and how do you believe you have connected so well with this character?

Sam Tyler didnt intrigue me at all at first! Dont get me wrong, i could see it was a great role, but i didnt want him to be Mr Perfect because that would have been not only boring to play, but incredibly annoying to watch. Because he's on screen ALL the time, the challenge for me was keeping the audience on his side, but at the same time making him

interesting enough (flaws in his character) to identify with. Once his 'dark side' had been worked out and he'd been put into this nightmare scenario, he began to intrigue me.

Any chance that we will see you in a comedy in the future? Some of my favorite moments in *Life on Mars* (and some of your other work) have been when you've had a chance to show how well you do comedy.

One of the first jobs i ever did was a BBC1 sitcom with David Threlfall called "Men of the world". It was set in a travel agents and we made 2 series of it, which i enjoyed doing. I do like comedy, and every so often its good to do, however, i suppose i'm more interested in serious drama.'Spaced' was nice to do,(even though Simon Pegg thought it would be "Hilarious" if i didnt say anything!) I'm doing a play later this year at the 'Bush' theatre in London, called "Elling", which i think (hope!) is v funny.

One of the best bits of *Life on Mars* has been seeing the differences and contrasts between modern-day society and 1970s society.

Is there anything about the 1970s that you think was better back then than it is today?

The only thing about the 70's which i think is better than today is a lost sense of innocence. I think that kids grow up too quickly nowadays. Also, i guess the Music was better. John and George were still alive, as was Elvis (for a while). Give me Led Zep, The Stones, AC/DC, The Pistols etc over frickin Westlife and Will Young anyday!

My question is — you and Phil work so well together and you seem to get on well in real life too. Would you like to work with him again if the right project came about?

I would work with Phil again at the drop of a hat. I love him. We worked together a couple of times previously, which made it easy from day 1 of LOM, it's like we were married for 2 years! We even lived next door to each other whilst filming series 2. I think he's a wonderful actor and we really do just 'click'.

With Series 2 poised to be so massive, how do you balance your need for privacy with your need to work and promote your work?

Having done an episode of *Spaced*, would you ever consider doing a movie with Simon Pegg?

First, the Simon Pegg thing. I know and admire Simon, when i asked why he doesnt put me in his films, he said that me, him and Martin Freeman were too similar. (cheeky sod) I think he's just scared i'll get all the laughs. (joke!)

In a slightly stalkerish fit of Googling for older interviews of you I found several that seemed to indicate that you're actually a very private kind of person, disliking public attention such as interviews etc. This strikes me as a rather puzzling, but intriguing quality in someone who's been making a living in not just one but two fields that tend to generate intense public attention of the sort you seem to dislike.

So, my question is: How does that fit together for you, being a private kind of person and being an actor/musician — especially nowadays, when there's such a cult of celebrity everywhere?

I am a very private person. I didnt become an actor to be famous, and its an aspect of my job that i'm not comfortable with. However, i understand that it comes with the territory, and deal with it the best i can.

I dont like attention, which i know is ridiculous given my profession, but there we are. I also believe that it makes an actor's job very difficult if he or she is a 'celebrity'.

One of the reasons i had to stop the band was i was never entirely comfortable being myself on stage. So when people started turning up to point at the 'bloke from the Lakes/Human traffic', i could stand it no longer. I can hide behind a character.

Also, fame obviously means you lose your anonymity, which is essential for 'people watching'. Something i used to find invaluable.

Having said all this, i am of course extremely grateful that people like my work! But to me, thats what it is, my work.

Ok, i think i may now be typing nonsense! so am gonna take a breather. will defto try and get the rest answered before the end of tomorrow. Bye for now!

Actors gain valuable experience and come away with things they've learnt from each role they play. My question is: What do you think you've gained from the role of Sam Tyler in *Life on Mars*?

What have i gained from playing Sam? Well... i had to learn to work differently on this job. After the first few weeks it became apparent that i couldnt prepare like i usually do because of the workload and lack of time. So i would learn lines on the spot. I now have a strange ability to learn 4 pages of dialogue in a few minutes, but if i stop thinking about it for a second my mind goes blank. Also, i will think twice about commiting to something that takes me away from home for such a long time.

But the best thing was working with such amazing people. I'll certainly never forget it!

Have you ever wanted to have your own action figure?

I would love my own action figure! I have a feeling it might happen this year. Cant say anymore, but keep an eye on those shelves next Xmas!

I think we were all less than thrilled that State of Play was going to be turned into an American production 😳 (why mess with perfection?), but I was wondering, if something else you've done was turned into an American production and all the team involved in making it; writers, directors, producers, etc. were quality and they asked YOU to recreate your role as an American (accent and all), would that be something you would be interested in or even consider?

If, as you say, the script, actors, producers etc were all top quality, i would definitely consider it. After all, if i'd 'created' the role in the first place (like Cal in State of play) then of course i would like to keep it.

When you were acting in Life on Mars, did you have freedom to suggest changes to the script as the filming progressed, or was the script rigidly adhered to? (I would love to know if the wonderful actors were able to make suggestions and "elaborate" on the story as written, and if so, was this frequently done?) It all seems so natural on film, and the most magical moments in the episodes have such an air of spontaneity, that this question has nagged at me for some time.

If there was something in the script that i didnt like, or wanted to say differently, they were fine with that. Both myself and Phil were given as much space as we needed and everybody involved was incredibly accomodating in that respect. After all, apart from Mathew, who knows more about Sam and Gene than myself and Phil? Before we started series 2 i was even invited to suggest character development and storyline idea's. Kudos are a wonderful company to work for. Not that we needed to change much in those wonderful scripts!

Do you incorporate method techniques (or the Stanislavsky system) into your preparation as an actor or is it more a play by ear kind of thing [right, big sobbing scene coming up - time to trap my hand in the door.]

As i said earlier, i had to change the way i worked on LOM. I went to a classical theatre/Stanislavski based drama school which offered very very little in screen acting technique, so i had to learn that as i worked. What i will say is that there is no such thing as "The method", Its just a 'box of tricks' if you like, something to use if you have trouble finding a certain emotion. Personally, i think i work more through instinct.

I'd like to know a little bit about the research and/or preparation you did for playing Vincent Van Gogh in Yellow House. Were there challenges in portraying such a legendary artist?

It was an honour to play Van Gogh. I had very little prep time between finishing LOM and starting 'The Yellow house', but luckily i was already a devoted Vincent fan, so i just re-read his wonderful letters and stared at his incredible work for hours on end. I obviously read Martin Gayford's fabulous book, and found as much information as i could about what he was like Physically. The way he walked and talked is thankfully well documented, as is the fact he had terrible, black and yellow teeth. So prepare yourself for those teeth!

Is it difficult working on a dramatic series knowing that important background character information could be made up by the writers as series progresses? This is probably naive, but do writers ever confer with actors on background information added later on in the series?

For example, at the end of LOM's first series we learn that Sam's father abandoned his family... did you know that at the beginning of the series? If not, do you feel like that knowledge may have changed the way you approached the character? Throughout the series Sam begs the voices he hears not to leave him... those scenes seem more poignant knowing that someone important to him actually did leave.....

Usually i would know about a character's background from begining to end before we started filming. However, LOM is not a 'usual' show! There were certain things i wasnt told about but that was good in a way, because of the whole 'coma/what the hell is going on' thing. This will become clear in series 2.

Could you share any practical advice for the young actor attempting to enter the professional world? Knowing there are no easy roads to get there, do you have any advice on how to enter an audition -for example, should you dress the part or be yourself until entering the character?

I'm not very good with advice i'm afraid! I would say trust your instinct, be confident (and honest with yourself) about your own ability, be brave and walk into an audition with the attitude that you are doing THEM a favour just by turning up.

We didn't scare you too awful much did we?

HaHa No you didn't!

Just wanna say to all... Thank's for your continued enthusiasm and devotion towards our show, We're all aware of it. Doing this Q+A was the least i could do, twas refreshing to be

able to answer quality questions myself, without a journalist putting their own 'angle' on it, or indeed editing the answers.

So, thanks for your support. The best way to show our thanks is series 2, coming your way VERY soon. Enjoy. Bye! x