

Fast cars are bad for your health

CARS are fine for getting you from A to B, traffic jams permitting, but I have never understood the way some people positively drool over the things.

Quentin Willson, pictured right, of *Top Gear* (BBC2, 8.30pm) is an irredeemable motor junkie who talks about cars the way Jilly Goolden does about vintage Chardonnay.

At least the show's laddish style has been toned down in recent years with the departure of that arch saloon-bar bore, Jeremy Clarkson.

There is still an irritating emphasis on speed and high performance in their reviews, however.

Considering the number of deaths on our roads caused by irresponsible driving, I wonder how they get away with this.

Could you imagine the

Beeb being allowed to do this sort of thing with, say, cigarettes?

"And this week on *Tab Gear*, we look at the latest hand-rolling tobaccos and papers - Is your spliff up to speed?" I think not.

Last night, the gang were dishing out their first ever awards for "Cars of the Year" in various categories. This is another instance where cars seem to be a special case.

Branded product endorsement on the BBC? That would never do on *Blue Peter*.

There was a much more interesting look at hi-tech hardware later, in *Horizon: A Miracle in Orbit* (BBC2, 9.30pm).

This excellent documentary told the story of the Hubble

Space Telescope, which sends us fascinating pictures of far distant stars.

NASA dropped a clanger of galactic proportions when a design fault nearly rendered the whole project useless.

Twelve years' work and \$2bn (that's TWO Millennium Domes!) almost went down the Swanee when vital

calculations rendered the telescope unable to focus.

Those clever rocket scientists soon put it right, however, and we now have a window on the universe that Galileo could only have dreamed of.

The pictures Hubble provides us with are breathtaking.

We saw stars being born in trillion-mile-long clouds of rainbow coloured gases, and

ancient galaxies whose light takes 12 billion years to reach us.

Such research may one day answer questions about how the universe itself came into being. Fascinating stuff, that.

So when you're reading *The Journal* tomorrow, why not take a peek at Gerard McCartan's astronomy column after the motoring pages?

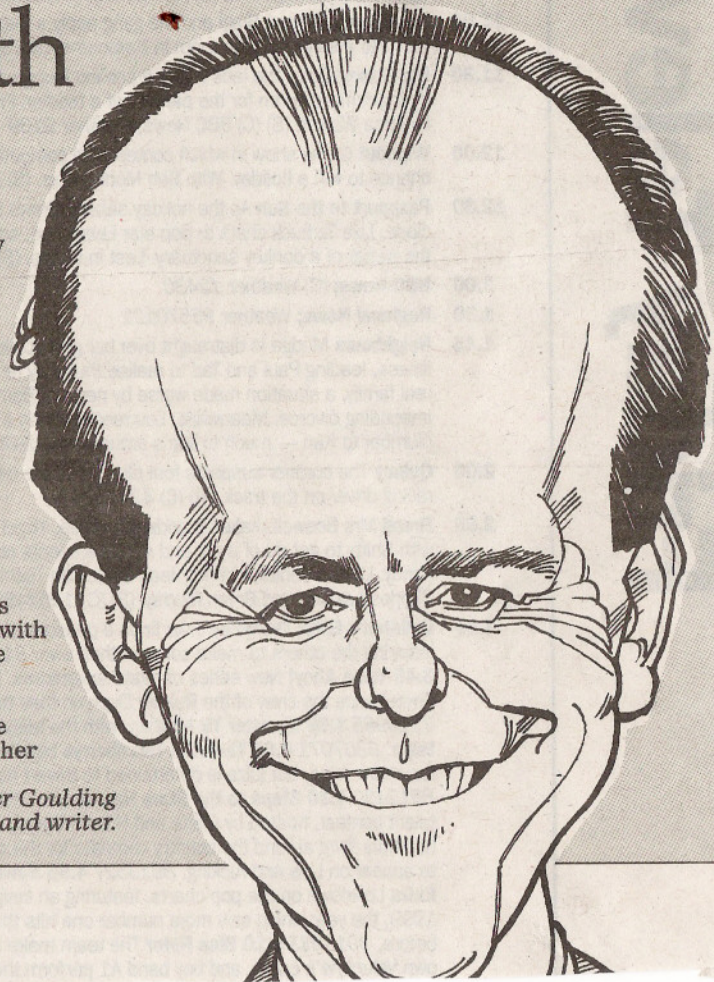
I'm able to impress Bonny Spice no end with my knowledge of the heavens.

Mind you, it's a different story if she wants me to change her spark plugs.

● Christopher Goulding is an actor and writer.

Last Night

by Christopher
 Goulding



She's a cherry lass

The Journal **television** and **radio**

Wednesday, March 8, 2000

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Helping out the feckless lunatics

TELLY is all about formats these days. Once TV producers find a winning format, they flog it to death.

Recently, I have been praying nightly for the last creaking nail to be hammered into the coffin of that most terminally overworked of genres – the home makeover show. Last night my prayers were answered.

DIY SOS (BBC12, 8pm) is the inevitable conclusion of the Beeb spending the last few years encouraging thousands of ham-fisted Handy Andy wannabes to tear their own homes apart.

Thus, just as the bloke with the shovel must come to clear up the mess after a Saturday night in the Bigg Market, so this show appears to pick up the pieces in the wake of earlier programmes such as *Changing Rooms*.

Lowri Turner (pictured, right) and her gang roam the ruined suburbs of our land, answering pleas for help from viewers needing rescue from their DIY disasters.

One family we were shown had decided the old homestead needed “a change of image”.

This had proceeded to the extent of them removing most of the plaster from their living room walls. They didn't know how to put it back.

Ever wondered where your licence money goes? Well, last night some of it went on redecorating the parlour of a pair of feckless lunatics who notably shouldn't be allowed out on their own.

What amazes me is that they invited millions of

viewers into their homes to see what a bunch of colossal buffoons they are.

Later, 15: *Looking for Mum* (C4, 9pm) was another fly-on-the-wall documentary, but one of an altogether more

gripping human tragedy.

This new series follows a number of 15-year-olds as they face the problems posed

by life in modern society.

Last night we saw Ying, a young London schoolgirl, searching for her mother whom she had not seen since she was two.

Sensitive and intelligently presented though this show was, I could not help feeling that to have TV cameras shadowing the private life of even the most settled and confident adolescent is a

dubious and voyeuristic practice. To do it to a young kid searching for her long-lost mum borders on the distasteful.

Ying was spared any intrusion on the actual reunion, through the subsequent days of rather muted attempts at re-establishing a relationship were shown in all their hideously embarrassing detail.

It would surely be more seemly for TV to address such issues in the form of drama.

● Christopher Goulding is an actor and writer

Last Night

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The Journal television and radio

Thursday, March 23, 2000

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Dedicated followers of fashion

JAYNE Middlemiss (pictured, right) returned to her native soil last night in an episode of *She's Gotta Have It* (C4, 8.30pm) set right here in the Toon.

Now, I know a bit about fashion. I once bought Bonny Spice a blouse, and she actually wears it in public. So it was with an expert eye that I watched Wor Jayne give three local lasses a make-over.

The show was full of advice about what's hot on the catwalk at the moment (it's called 'ladylike chic' for those of you not in the know) but it was disappointingly short on local colour.

There was none of that "best party city in the universe" stuff we've become used to lately.

After all, the inside of one clothes shop looks much the

same as another the length and breadth of the country - and anyway, they've got some lovely frocks on sale in the Grainger Market.

Later, over on the Beeb, we looked at fashion victims of another kind.

Dangerous Company

(BBC2, 9.50pm) was the first episode of what looks like being an excellent documentary series about the darker side of the world of commerce.

Thirty-five years ago, corporations across the globe underwent a revolution in the way they operated, taking their cue from armies of economic gurus. The next two decades saw a frenzy of take-overs, diversification, and the

establishment of huge pyramid structures of management.

By the mid-80s, of course, it had all gone pear-shaped.

Thus, the new buzz word in the jargon of the so-called experts was "downsizing".

In plain English, that meant

wholesale redundancies. Now, computers and the internet are moving the goalposts all over again.

But, God help us, the men in suits are still on the case.

Despite some irritatingly repetitive background music, the programme was a joy to watch.

Captains of industry in whom we entrust the running of our economy showed themselves to be little

more than fickle trend followers, rather than shrewd decision makers.

Some of the consultants themselves were exposed as failed executives who would struggle to sell kebabs on match day in the Toon.

Last night's episode was ironically entitled *Big is Beautiful*. Somehow, that reminded me of an advertising campaign being run on TV at the moment by the bank which is about to close down dozens of its small branches.

Hmm...

● Christopher Goulding is an actor and writer.

Last Night
by Christopher Goulding



The Journal **television** and **radio**

Tuesday, April 4, 2000

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Indian collage and 'Toon' college

LAST night the Beeb took us on the first of three *Indian Journeys* (BBC2, 7.10pm) in a new documentary series which will look at religion in that fascinating country.

We followed presenter William Dalrymple on a trail to the source of the Ganges – not just a river, but a goddess to the 10 million Hindu pilgrims who make the journey every 12 years.

We were treated to a marvellous collage of the brilliant sights and sounds that make up this larger-than-life oriental version of the *Canterbury Tales*.

Ash-smearing monks mingled with holy men whose naked bodies were painted in rainbow colours, whilst we heard the chanting of prayers and a conversation with a

Tamil scholar who compared the nature poetry of Wordsworth to Vedic cosmology.

Dalrymple wisely kept his commentary to a minimum, preferring to let India amaze us in its own way.

After all, this was the region in which The Beatles sat at the feet of Ravi Shankar and the Maharishi 30 years ago.

You could almost smell the atmosphere in one marvellous shot, where the waters of the holy river glimmered at night by the blaze of 10,000 torches, paper lanterns, and cooking fires.

Coming straight after all that, I thought *University Challenge* (BBC2, 8pm) might

be rather tame.

No chance of that, however, once I realised that my alma mater – our own Newcastle University – were taking on

Keble College, Oxford, for a place in the semi-finals of the television series

I dutifully donned my old

college scarf, dusted down the gonk mascot, and settled down to watch The Toon romp home beneath the relentless sardonic sneer of chairman Jeremy Paxman.

There might not have been a Geordie voice to be heard on our team, but we were well captained by a Glaswegian medical student.

His strong personality was more than a match for Pax-

man's gigantic ego and his shamelessly open Oxonian bias.

Unfortunately, there's no accounting for ill luck.

The Toon team were effectively pole-axed by landing two sets of mathematics questions that would have had Pythagoras scratching his head and reaching for the pocket calculator.

We were thrashed, I'm afraid (210 to 120, if you want to know).

Never mind though – the North-East is still in with a chance next week, when Durham take on Aberystwyth in the third quarter-final.

Best of luck chaps, and swot up on the quadratic equations.

Christopher Goulding is an actor and writer.

Last Night
by Christopher
Goulding



Future looks very

The Journal **television** and **radio**

Thursday, May 25, 2000

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Tomorrow's World is yesterday's idea

LAST night's *Tomorrow's World* (BBC1, 7pm) came live from Newcastle and concentrated on the latest developments in music as part of the Beeb's Music Live festival.

This was a bit of a misnomer, as there was hardly a note of live music to be heard.

The emphasis was on the electronic, digital nature of recorded sound today.

One feature illustrated how recorded music can improve your health as an aid to exercise.

Hardly a new discovery I'd have thought, as anyone who's ever been to an aerobics class might know.

I've lost a good half a stone since I discovered the joys of salsa with Bonny Spice.

Then we looked at the use

of taped classical music in some schools to improve the behaviour of disruptive pupils. Again, "Music hath charms..." as William Congreve put it nearly 300 years ago.

The keynote feature of the programme was the creation and live

performance of a new piece by Radio 1's *Dream Team*, made up from electronic snippets e-mailed in by viewers.

It would seem that words like "new" and "live" have been redefined lately, as the result was merely an acoustic collage of samples lifted from other recordings and regurgitated at the touch of a button by a

machine.

For goodness sake, people wrote songs and instruments when I was a lad. Come back, Abba, all is forgiven.

Presenters Philippa Forester (pictured, right) and Peter Snow did their best to be cool and upbeat about the whole thing.

Unfortunately, they looked and came across more like your mam and dad at a wedding disco as they strolled self-consciously around the studio to a techno soundtrack. The problem is that, for all its futuristic aspirations, *Tomorrow's World* is such a dated and terminally clapped-out format for a TV show.

Last Night

by Christopher Goulding

The cheerfully earnest tone of relentlessly sustained enthusiasm reeks of a 1970s edition of *Blue Peter*.

The house-hunting show *Location, London, Location* (C4, 8.30pm) is just another aspect of that long-running conspiracy between the media and estate agents dedicated to inflating property prices out of all relation to reality or a sensible attitude towards valuation.

A more suitable signature tune for it would have been Abba's *Money, Money, Money*. Apparently, north Northumberland is now regarded as part of Edinburgh's stockbroker belt. Aye, there'll be Feng Shui consultants in Wooler soon, mark my words.

Christopher Goulding is an actor and writer.



Pass on hand to

The Journal **television** and **radio**

Thursday, April 27, 2000

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Too true to life to entertain

WITH cop shows an all too regular part of our weekly TV diet, it's nice to see the odd feature-length special come along.

Rebus (ITV, 9pm) is completely new to the telly, being an adaptation of Ian Rankin's successful novels.

As Edinburgh was the backdrop, I confess I had rather expected a sort of tartan and shortbread version of *Inspector Morse*.

However, Rankin has obviously been watching films like *Trainspotting*, and his stories are set firmly in the seedy world of drugs, prostitution, and brutal violence.

Rebus, played by John Hannah (pictured, right), drank heavily and mixed as

easily with the villains as with his fellow cops. A definite film noir feel was injected into the proceedings by the eponymous hero regularly giving us a cynical commentary in voice-over as he made his way through the mean streets of Auld Reekie.

Unfortunately, I found little in this show to make me feel like tuning in to the next one, to be shown later this year. *Rebus* is a colourless and unsympathetic character, the world he inhabits is depressingly bleak and hopeless, and the plot was too convoluted and corpse-ridden to be entertaining. I'm sure it

was all very realistic and relatively true to life.

Maybe that's why I found it so depressing.

Last Night

by Christopher Goulding

Meanwhile, the Beeb wheeled out their answer to Rory Bremner with *Alistair McGowan's Big Impression* (BBC1, 10pm).

Since the days of Mike Yarwood, the subject matter for impressionists has tended to be dominated by politicians.

So it made a refreshing change to see that McGowan's show was largely poking fun at the world of popular culture.

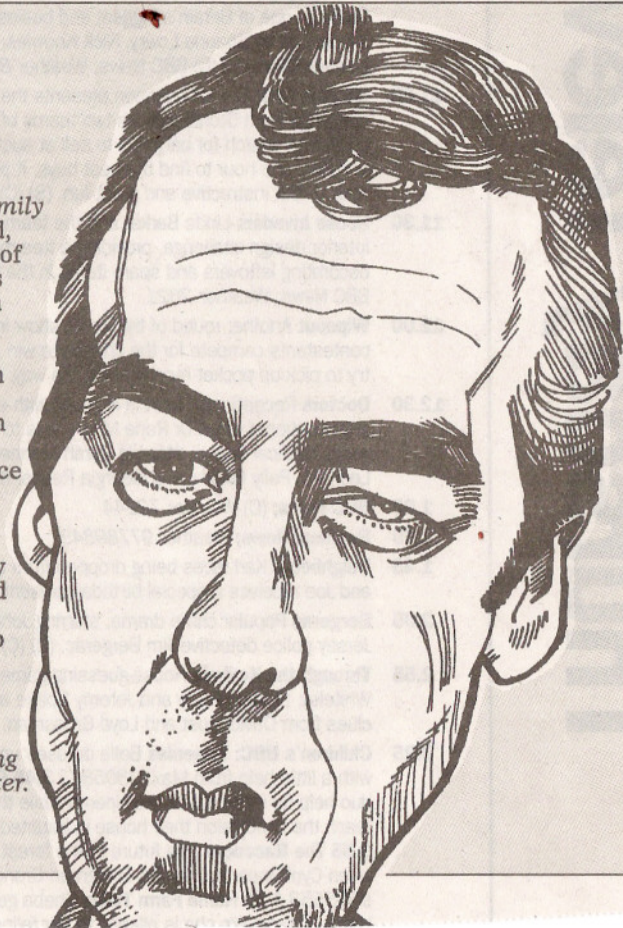
TV shows such as *Changing*

Rooms and *The Royle Family* were mercilessly spoofed, and a withering pastiche of Britpop band and Beatles wannabes Oasis was both well observed and funny.

However, the perils of filming sketches for such topical shows too far in advance were revealed in one case.

McGowan had to preface his parody of the private life of Posh & Becks with an apology – the piece had obviously been filmed before David Beckham surprised everyone by stumping up £300 to have his floppy locks shorn off.

● Christopher Goulding is an actor and writer.



television and radio

Saturday, July 22, 2000

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Some gnome bouncers, Alan

ALAN Titchmarsh and his gang from *Ground Force* (BBC1, 8pm) were in Whitley Bay last night, transforming a patch of weeds into a gravel garden with an appropriate seashore theme.

Two days, and £1,000 later, the result was more reminiscent of the stony beach at Hastings, rather than the sandy local coastline.

Perhaps a miniature Spanish City, a half-eaten kebab, and some garden-gnome night-club bouncers would have made it look more realistic.

As for the stone theme, I think they must have taken a leaf out of Bonny Spice's book, for every time we go for a walk on the beach, she collects an interesting pebble or two to decorate her

herbaceous borders.

Later, over on Tyne Tees, *Cover Their Tracks* (ITV, 10.30pm) was the first instalment of a series taking a look at the tribute band industry. Last night's show concentrated on The Bryan Adams Experience – a group of mechanics, surveyors, and solicitors who do their best to look and sound the eponymous Canadian rocker (pictured right) and his band.

Make no mistake, tribute bands are big business.

More than 1,000 of them operate in the UK, earning up to £600 a night. Why are they so popular?

According to the fans, seeing such a band can be a

more enjoyable experience than the real thing – the smaller concerts are more intimate, and the tickets are much cheaper.

Not surprisingly, some original artists are more copied than others – there are at least 16 ersatz Abbas, but far fewer imitation

versions of still extant bands, such as The Rolling Stones.

Which, of course, is the key to the whole thing. Highly idealised versions of your favourite long-disappearing acts are nostalgia on a stick. For instance, The Bootleg Beatles take you through the fab four's entire career in a single evening, from the Cavern Club to the roof of the

Apple Building.

It's as much theatre as music. This is all well and good, just so long as these artists don't take things too far.

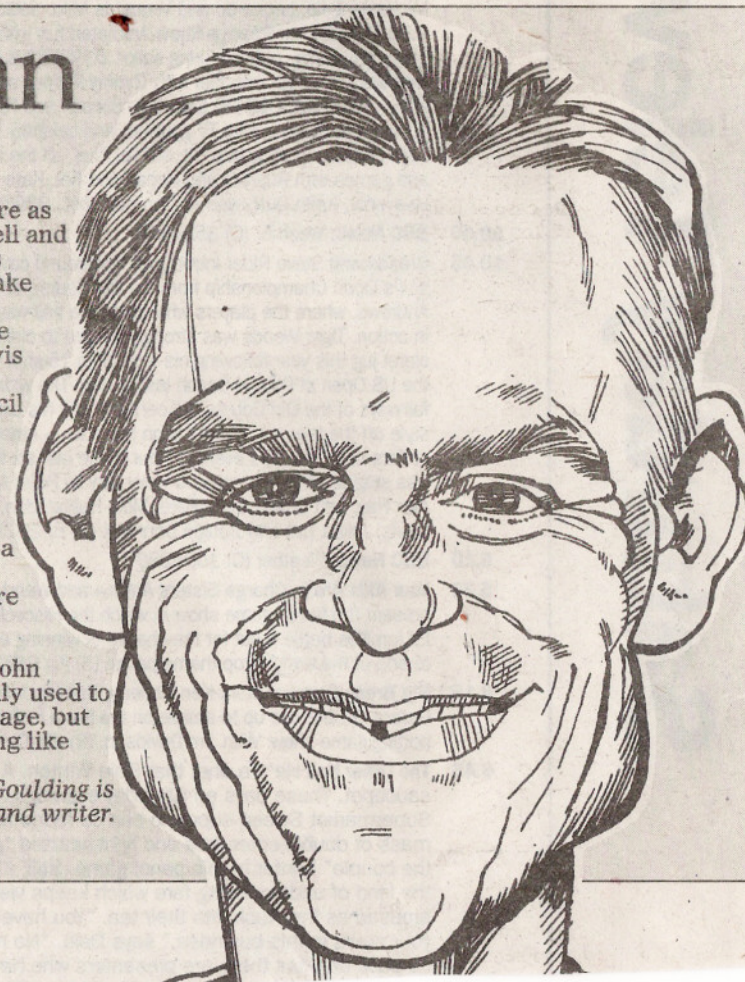
After all, there are more than a few Elvis impersonators out there living in council flats called "Graceland".

One thing they didn't explain was why the presenter, Colin Brewer, wore a bowler hat throughout the entire show.

Led Zeppelin's drummer, the late John Bonham, occasionally used to sport a bowler on stage, but Brewer looks nothing like him.

● Christopher Goulding is an actor and writer.

Last Night
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Travelling back to