

THE MAKING OF

Sci-fi spoof *Alternative 3* is widely regarded as television's equivalent of the Orson Welles radio play *War of the Worlds*. *A3* has been much discussed over the last 30 years, but the makers of the film have been conspicuously absent from the debate. Now, for the first time, director Christopher Miles breaks his silence and talks to **STEVE MARSHALL** in an exclusive interview for *Fortean Times*. All pictures from Christopher Miles's collection.



ALTERNATIVE 3

The year 1977 was hardly the best of times in Great Britain: the nation's morale was low and things appeared to be getting steadily worse. With 'Sunny Jim' Callaghan as Prime Minister, inflation was crippling the economy and even the firemen were poised to strike. The Sex Pistols were trying to sabotage the Queen's Silver Jubilee celebrations, and when the Eurovision Song Contest was held in London it was won by France. It was a *very* worrying time.

On the evening of 20 June 1977, several million British television viewers tuned in to ITV's "Science Report" and their fears were confirmed: things really *were* getting worse. A lot worse, in fact.

The programme revealed how a trail of murder and intrigue had led to the discovery of a covert plan to evacuate the doomed Earth and colonise Mars. Not everyone would be going – just a carefully selected elite.

The rest of the population would be left behind to die, as accelerating climate change made the Earth uninhabitable. And this plan had already been in operation for years! The 'brain drain' scientists leaving Britain in droves were not going to work in the USA, as generally believed, but on Mars.

Many, in fact, were there already. An 'ex-astronaut' told how NASA's Moon programme had been a sham: it existed merely as a cover-up for their *true* purpose of creating a Moon-based launching pad for trips to Mars. Furthermore, America and Russia were in cahoots; they had already secretly altered the atmosphere of Mars to make it habitable. What was more, when they had first landed there, back in 1962, they had discovered life and *filmed it!*

The programme was, of course, a hoax (see FT64:47–49). Three decades years later, it's difficult to imagine how anyone could possibly have believed any of this – but many viewers *did* believe it.

Made by Anglia Television, *Alternative 3* had been hyped with trailers before the screening, ensuring a healthy audience on the night. Shown in what was an established weekly drama slot, the hour-long programme purported to be a serious investigation by "Science Report", an entirely invented strand that had an air of authenticity. Presenter Tim Brinton was well known as an ex-newsreader, familiar from many current-affairs programmes. For many viewers that night, there was no reason to believe that *Alternative 3* was *not* true.

The day after the broadcast saw a storm of protest from the British press. Journalists who'd attended a press screening before transmission had quickly realised that the programme was a hoax, but had gamely played along with it. TV critics do at least read the end credits; those at the end of *Alternative 3* listed all the characters in the film alongside their real names, making it quite plain that they were actors. And there too, in very large letters, was the date of the film: 1 April 1977. *Alternative 3* had originally been planned as an April Fool joke, but industrial action delayed it until June.

Not surprisingly, the press had a field day. The *Daily Express*, which led with the story, claimed that thousands of irate viewers had "protested in shock and horror", jamming both their own switchboard and ITV's. Accusations of "irresponsible broadcasting" were rebuffed by ITV and Anglia, who had announced that the programme was a hoax only an hour after it was transmitted. The press reaction rumbled on for several weeks, and *Alternative 3* was never shown on British TV again.

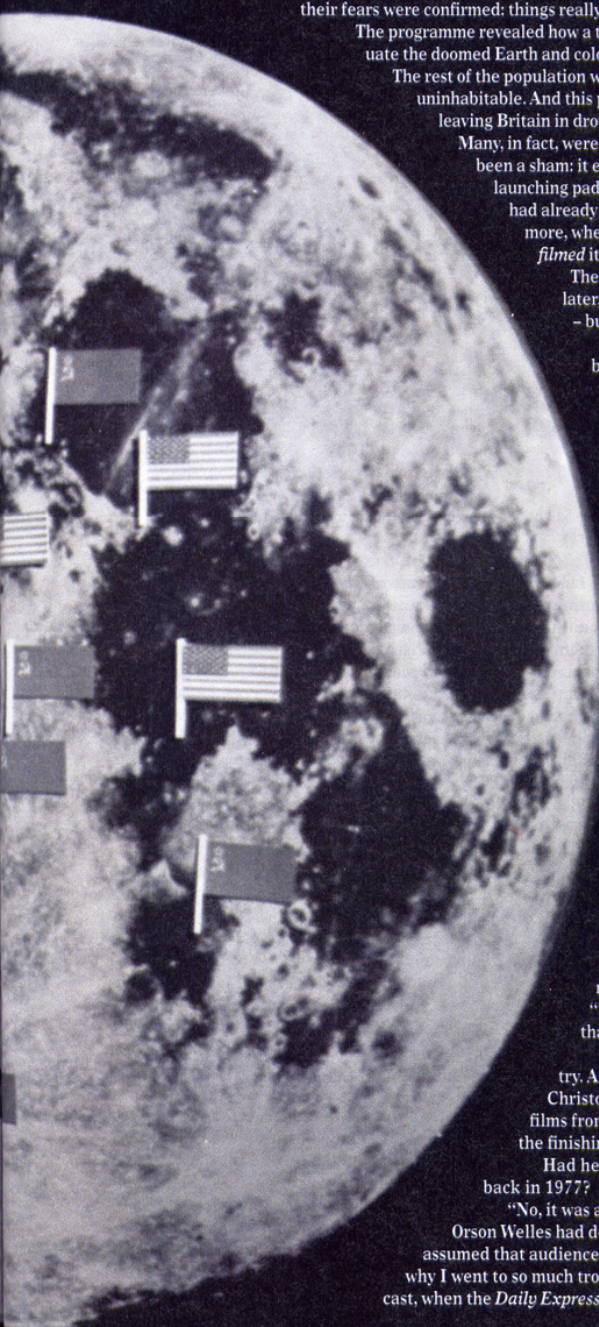
"A REALLY SUPER BROADCAST"

So who was actually to blame for this outrage? The culprits were quickly identified as writer David Ambrose and director Christopher Miles. Both remained gloatingly unrepentant, with the triumphant Miles announcing: "This country needs a stir once every five years and I'm glad I've done just that."

The pair went on to enjoy long and successful careers in the film industry. Ambrose is now a thriller writer, best known for his Charlie Monk novels; Christopher Miles (brother of actress Sarah Miles) continues to write and direct films from his Wiltshire hideaway. It was there that I tracked him down, as he put the finishing touches to *Alternative 3*'s long-awaited DVD release.

Had he and David Ambrose expected such a dramatic reaction to their film back in 1977?

"No, it was a total surprise! Obviously, we were aware of what had happened when Orson Welles had done *War of the Worlds* on radio, but that had been 40 years earlier. We'd assumed that audiences would now be sophisticated enough to realise our film was a hoax – that's why I went to so much trouble to make it look convincing. I was at home on the night of the broadcast, when the *Daily Express* rang.



A woman's changing face



Angry viewers protest after 'War of the Worlds' show STORM OVER TV'S SPOOF

By Christopher Jones

THOUSANDS of viewers all over the country protested in shock and anger over a science fiction "documentary" put out by ITV last night.

From the moment that "Alternative Three" ended at 10 p.m. last night, thousands of letters poured in to the Express and ITV companies, to complain.

The letters have been put into two separate "folders" at the Express and into three separate folders at the ITV company.

"Irresponsible"

The programme was described by Robert Anderson, chief executive of the British Broadcasting Corporation, as "a disturbing and irresponsible piece of television."

Coronation Street's Jubilee



The Queen meets Coronation Street's Fred the Barman (played by Fred Firth), Sooty (played by Shirley Stanger) and other characters (played by Roger and Eric Sharpe) (Miles Carron).

Anyone here seen Amin?

"AMIN IS HERE" was the headline on the front page of the Express last night following another reported sighting of the former Prime Minister.

It was only then that I realised what was going on with all the phone calls and protests. I remember there was a radio phone-in that went on the rest of that night, with dozens of people ringing in to talk about Alternative 3.

ABOVE: The broadcast of Alternative 3 caused a furore in the British press, to the delight of unrepentant director Christopher Miles (pictured below).

It was only then that I realised what was going on with all the phone calls and protests. I remember there was a radio phone-in that went on the rest of that night, with dozens of people ringing in to talk about Alternative 3. What really amazed me was that, firstly, so many people had been fooled into thinking it was real; and secondly, that no one seemed to have bothered reading the end titles that confirmed it was a hoax. It became clear to me that many people see what they want to see, not what's in front of their eyes: many viewers thought they had seen flying saucers in the film - and there were none.

Fortunately, Miles is an inveterate hoarder. His personal 16mm print of the film turned out to be the only copy in existence, as Anglia Television had lost everything relating to Alternative 3 - even the original contracts. He has also preserved an archive of production stills, original shooting scripts and some of the hundreds of letters that flooded in after the broadcast. The 30-year-old letters are fascinating - most of them from viewers who believed the programme was genuine. Some who'd missed the 1 April date at the end had also failed to notice which channel they were watching. Consequently, a large number of letters were sent by mistake to the BBC, who in turn passed them on to Anglia.

A terribly nice lady from Essex wrote to thank "Mr Brinton and Team" for a "truly marvellous programme". "I do not find it the least bit horrifying," she wrote, "and would like to know more of what is going on." She went on to discuss some of the issues raised in the programme and related her family's UFO experiences; then, after offering her congratulations on a "really super broadcast", she'd posted the letter off to BBC2.



DAILY EXPRESS OPINION

The Mob

THE MOB appears here to stop the... (text continues)

Will you know if TV is telling the truth tonight?



The men behind it, author Ambrose, left, and director Miles

MORE THAN a decade ago, when British television was still in the fledgling adolescence, American communications theorist Marshall McLuhan predicted: "The medium is the message."

By Ross Franklin

DECEIVE

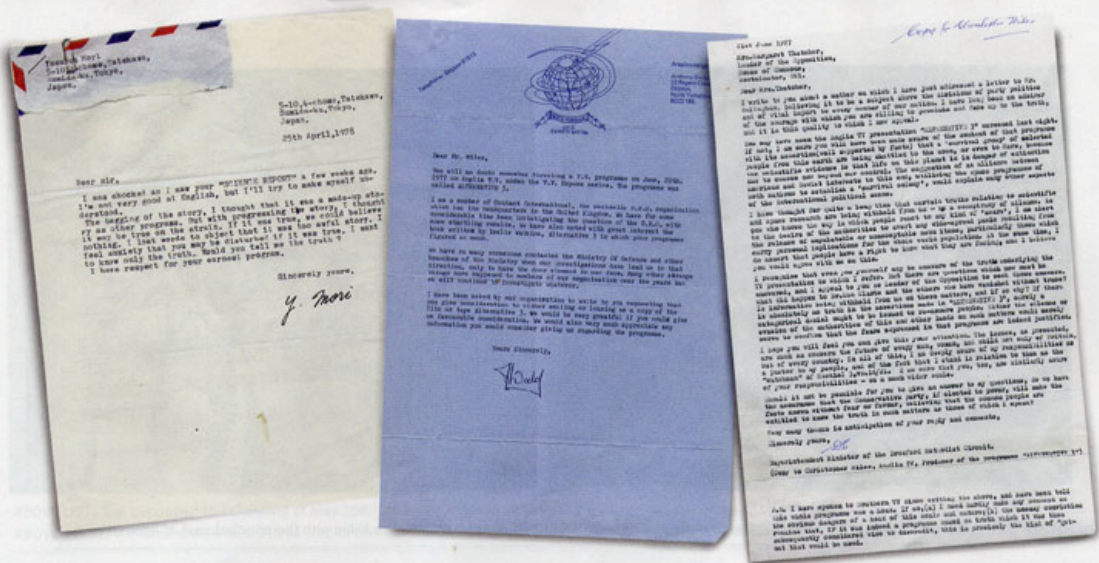
DRAMA

WARNING

"All true...except the lies"

By James Murray

THE more behind "Alternative Three" are... (text continues)



ABOVE: Public confusion over *Alternative 3*'s status as fact or fiction gave rise to some interesting, and sometimes odd, correspondence from viewers.

ance that the Conservatives, when back in power, would be properly informing the public about issues raised in *Alternative 3*. The typed letter is quite long, occupying a whole page of foolscap; an extra strip of paper has then been carefully pasted onto the bottom. It reads: "PS. I have spoken to Southern TV since writing the above, and have been told that this whole programme was a hoax. If so, (a) I hardly need make any comment on the obvious dangers of a hoax of this scale and nature; (b) the uneasy conviction remains that, if it were indeed a programme based on truth which it was then subsequently considered wise to discredit, this is precisely the kind of "get-out" that would be used."

FAKING IT

March 1978 saw the release of a book version of *Alternative 3* written by Leslie Watkins at the request of Sphere Books (FT121:28-31). Sharing the credit with Ambrose and Miles, Watkins did a fair job of expanding the one hour script into a book which sold over 30,000 copies in the first six months. Translated into many different languages, it sold all around the world – as did the film.

"It was shown everywhere," relates Miles. "In Canada, it was on seven times, by public request. Japan too, showed it often. Anglia had made some sales even before the film was finished. I didn't benefit of course – I'd done a deal where I only got a percentage

Letters came from UFO groups wanting to borrow the film to show their members

from America, and it was banned there."

Alternative 3 is still banned in the USA. However, this is not, as has been alleged, because of the secrets it reveals. There is a US law making it illegal for broadcasters to disguise fiction as fact – specifically banned is the use of the "we interrupt this broadcast..." device – which was introduced as a response to the alleged panic provoked by Orson Welles's 1938 *War of the Worlds* (see FT120:40-43; 199:42-47).

I asked if there was any truth in the story that *Alternative 3* was written over lunch.

"Absolutely, yes!" chortles Miles. "The basic idea was, anyway. David and I met to discuss a script he was working on, about miss-

JIM KEITH AND ALTERNATIVE 3

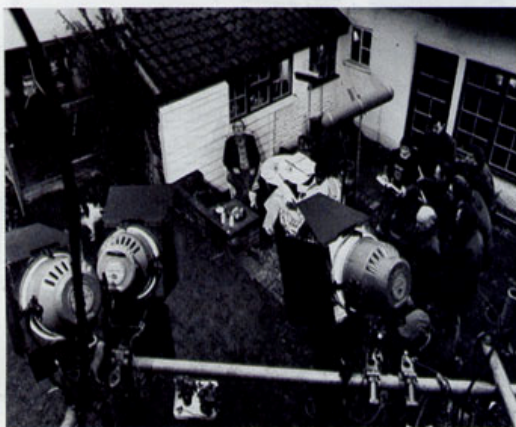
It seems surprising how often *Alternative 3* crops up in Google searches of conspiracy themes. Surprising, that is, until you read Jim Keith's *Casebook on Alternative 3 – UFOs, Secret Societies and World Control*. The book is breathtaking in its scope: there's scarcely been a conspiracy in history that is not somehow connected to *Alternative 3*. Keith died accidentally (?) after falling off a stage at the Burning Man Festival in 1999 (FT178:76-79), and if he really was bumped off, as has been alleged, it could have been by absolutely anyone: they're all in his books!

In this 1994 book from IllumiNet Press, Jim applies his 'Grand Unified

Conspiracy Theory' to *Alternative 3*. Starting with a detailed examination of the film, he exposes it as a crude and obvious hoax – and then goes on to declare that it's all accidentally true! The third chapter runs to only a dozen pages, yet crammed into them you'll find: Global Conspiracy; the Nazis; the CIA; the Freemasons and their control of both World Wars; the Illuminati; Madame Blavatsky; Cecil Rhodes; the Golden Dawn; the New World Order; the Round Table Group; the Rothschilds... and so it goes on.

Nazi Death-Rays; Crop Circles; Jack the Ripper; OSS-CIA sex and chaos-magic rituals... Awesome.





ABOVE LEFT: A chilly bungalow outside Norwich stands in for America. ABOVE RIGHT: Director Christopher Miles with the principal cast of *Alternative 3*.

ing people, and it just wasn't going anywhere. David's French wife turned up holding the latest copy of *Paris Match* and there on the cover was the first photo from the surface of Mars, taken by the *Viking* probe. I said: "So what if all those missing people were actually going to *Mars*?" Then all the other elements just fell into place... It took a couple of hours. Anglia turned the film down at first. The decision was overturned by John Woolf, an old film man. He was proved right: the film made a lot of money for Anglia.'

And the locations?

"We shot most of the film around Norfolk, as Anglia Television was based in Norwich. We filmed throughout January, which was absolutely freezing, and had to make it look like summer. One key character is 'Bob Grodin', the ex-astronaut who's since become an alcoholic wreck. He was played by Shane Rimmer, a wonderful actor who had been in *Doctor Strangelove* but didn't become well known until later. His scenes were supposed to have been shot in America, but it was actually a bungalow on the outskirts of Norwich, that we'd modified with screen doors and a barbecue. Grodin's American girlfriend was played by the reigning Miss Norfolk. We couldn't dare let her speak...

"I had wanted to use ordinary people in the film, but was forced to use Equity members. I think they all did a pretty good job in the end – actors find it difficult to do 'ordinary'. Some did become famous later, but at the time they were all virtually unknown except for Tim Brinton, who was, I think, perfect as the presenter. He had a familiar face and a gravitas that lent authenticity to the whole thing. Rather like Richard Dimbleby, when he did the *Spaghetti Harvest*."

In fact, *Alternative 3*'s original air-date of 1 April 1977 would have been the 20th anniversary of the BBC's famous hoax. Although he claims not to have known this, Miles readily acknowledges *Spaghetti Harvest* as an inspiration.

"I actually interviewed Dimbleby's son Jonathan for the role of presenter; but quite honestly, I didn't think he had his father's sense of humour. He didn't like the idea anyway, and thought it might damage his career. Then I auditioned that man Jeffrey Archer. He

"The creature moving below the surface of Mars is actually my fingers wiggling..."

was broke at the time and was up for anything. We shared the same agent, who persuaded me to give him a tryout. And he was *AWFUL!*"

Many have noted that the film *Capricorn One* – in which Apollo astronauts are not sent to the Moon but removed from the capsule and delivered to a film studio where the landings are faked – was made the following year. Did Miles believe the film's premise was poached from *Alternative 3*?

"No, I didn't personally; meeting the producer of *Capricorn One* convinced me that it was just a coincidence. Remember, the 'faked Moon landing' stories had been in circulation for years – since the late Sixties, I believe. We also used that thing about the Russians: that they'd started the space race and then given up... or had they?"

Our film drew on several themes that were current at that time, which is why I think it touched a collective nerve. As well as the 'brain drain' there'd been a great deal of discussion in the press that year about us heading for a new Ice Age: we were certainly having chaotic weather. In '76, we'd had that terribly hot summer and a drought – then it snowed in Miami, for the first time ever. We'd also had earthquakes all around the world. I think people were starting to get worried about climate change for the first time and the film played on those fears."

THE VRILLON INCIDENT

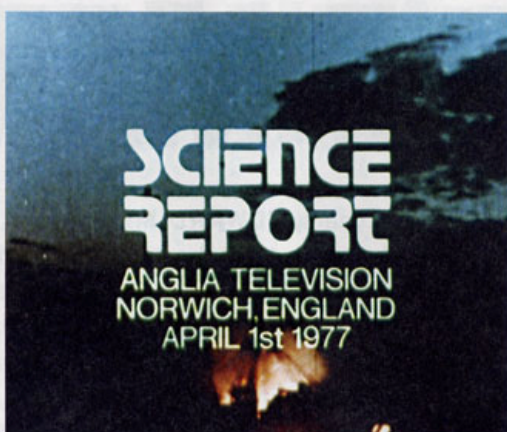
Alternative 3 was not the only sci-fi hoax of 1977. At 5.10 pm on Saturday 26 November, the ITN news was taken over for six minutes by a being named 'Vrillon' who claimed to be a representative of the 'Ashtar Galactic Command' (FT24:50–51). The TV picture wasn't affected, just the sound. Vrillon's speech (which was rather tastefully treated with electronic effects) can be found on the Internet as an mp3 and a transcript. While no one has ever come forward to claim responsibility for this rogue transmission, most people have concluded that it was indeed a hoax achieved by taking over the Southern Television transmitter at Hannington, Hampshire.

Despite his impressive, military-sounding title, Vrillon comes across as a typical space brother of the familiar contactee type and a bit of a hippie. He warns of impending environmental catastrophe, as our planet moves into "the New Age of Aquarius", urging mankind to give up their "weapons of evil" as the time of conflict is past. Dismissing money as "worthless dross", he hints that we unwittingly share our planet with other beings.

After signing off with the snappy "May you be blessed by the supreme love and truth of the cosmos", he was never heard of again.



ABOVE LEFT: The supposed Mars landing of May 1962, showing a "creature" tunnelling just below the surface (actually Miles wiggling his fingers).



ABOVE RIGHT: The date shown on the final credits (the original planned broadcast date) should perhaps have given the game away to observant viewers.

LIFE ON MARS

Miles is particularly proud of the film's climax: video evidence of life on Mars, allegedly shot during a secret unmanned landing in 1962.

"I had to watch through literally thousands of feet of film, looking for a suitable Martian creature. Anglia had a huge wildlife library and when I'd gone through that, I started looking at what we could buy in. Much of it was of sea creatures, and though it was good, nothing was quite right. Then Anglia started griping about what it would cost, so I did it myself."

The sequence starts with a surprisingly convincing aerial shot, allegedly filmed from the Martian Lander on its descent; it was actually a stock helicopter shot of the Red Desert in Ethiopia. Through bursts of static, we see the surface of Mars looming closer as the craft lands. Suddenly, the sand begins to move, as if some creature is tunnelling just below the surface. An excited voice on the tape announces:

"22nd of May 1962 - We're on the planet Mars, and we have life!"

So how were the special effects achieved?

"I just made a 'Martian surface' of damp sand and buried my forearm in it," laughs Miles. "The mysterious creature moving below the surface of Mars is actually my fingers, wiggling up through the sand! We transferred the film to video; masked out part of the monitor to look like a spaceship window, and re-filmed it - manually interfering with the video player to make the picture roll and flicker. Remember, there were no computer effects in those days."

This sequence was being used as late as 1990 in lectures by leading Scientologist 'Captain' Bill Robertson (once second in command to L Ron Hubbard himself). In a transcript, he analyses the 'Martian Landing' film, deducing that this can be no American or Russian spaceship, as the windows are the wrong shape, and don't have rivets! Robertson can also make out features on the Martian surface that just look like sand to us ordinary humans (Captain Bill did claim to be from another galaxy). He can see a control tower and three circular landing pads, each over 100ft (30m) across. Carefully weighing up all the evidence before him, the Captain concludes that in this film is the definitive proof that the Americans did *not* send a spaceship to Mars: they got a lift there in a flying saucer. "That," he affirms, "was the big secret of *Alternative 3*".

And finally, what does Miles think of the persistent claims that his hoax accidentally exposed a *real* conspiracy?

"We did get strange phone calls and letters to that effect, but

I think they were just from people hoaxing us. Someone phoned Anglia TV, claiming to be from an old people's home where one of the residents had died of shock after watching our programme. Anglia traced the call but it just turned out to be a public library somewhere...

"There was just one very strange episode that I still can't explain. In 1982, I was asked by the British Council to show my print of *Alternative 3* at a Greek sci-fi film festival being held in Delphi. I duly turned up with a chap from the British Council, both of us smartly dressed for the occasion, which we'd assumed would be something like BAFTA. We were greeted by the organiser - a scruffy, fat man who wore a T-shirt saying 'FUCK ME' in large letters. He informed us that a porn film festival had just finished, and the sci-fi one would be starting next. There was no publicity and the 'cinema' was just a school building with an ancient projector that damaged my film.

"But the peculiar thing was that just before my film started, three mysterious black limousines pulled up: they'd driven out from Athens. Six passengers got out, two men from each car, and all wore black suits. They came in and watched the film; then, without speaking to anyone, they left together in silence. It was all very strange - but I suppose they could have been film critics..."

The long-unseen and newly-restored *Alternative 3* looks surprisingly good after 30 years. Quaintly dated by its clipped English accents, and the fact that everyone in it seems to smoke, it's still a very entertaining film. Some of the issues raised in 1977 were, in fact, very prescient: the Space Shuttle, central to the plot, was then only being tested and didn't fly properly until 1981; water was not found on Mars until 2005; and who, in the Seventies, could possibly have predicted that climate change would become the hot topic of the 21st century?

As one reviewer put it: "It's all true... except the lies." **T**

Christopher Miles has recently restored the one surviving print of *Alternative 3*, which is now available on DVD with additional material from Soda Pictures (www.sodapictures.com). Turn to p67 for your chance to win a copy.



"Some of 'em up there really believed it"

A contemporary cartoon by Jon.

Author Biography



STEVE MARSHALL is currently writing about acoustics for a new title in the *Wooden Books* series. Also a musician, he was once a composer in the BBC's Radiophonic Workshop and now specialises in surround sound. See www.stevemarshall.org.uk.