



**IVOR CUTLER AND THE ECCENTRIC MISCELLANY**

# Ivor Cutler and Friends

‘Anyone can be seen to be eccentric if you take him out of his milieu and put him into someone else’s.’ – Ivor Cutler, 1974

Ivor Cutler, the poet, singer, musician, teacher, painter, illustrator, sculptor, playwright and all-round creative, was born in Govan in January 1923. Across a wide-ranging career which lasted more than half a century, he produced over 1,500 written works and made some 400 radio and television appearances. He published 29 books, many self-illustrated and several of them intended for children, as well as 11 albums of songs, poems, stories, dialogues and plays.

Cutler’s radio career was substantial and sustained, yet to television audiences he was something of an occasional curiosity. Never given his own show barring some untransmitted pilots, he was instead boxed up as an amusing turn in light entertainment shows such as *The Acker Bilk Band Show* (BBC TV, 1962) or as a frequent, freakish contributor to *Late Night Line-Up* (BBC Two, 1964-71).

This session sets out to offer up examples of where his style, and perceived eccentricity, was best used. Perhaps the ultimate example, and his most widely remembered screen appearance, was in The Beatles’ Boxing Day spectacular *The Magical Mystery Tour* (BBC One, 1967). His character, the lugubrious Buster Bloodvessel, declared he was ‘concerned for you to enjoy yourselves... within the limits of British decency.’ We ask the same of you all this afternoon.

## **Alive and Kicking – British Poets**

Ivor Cutler trained as a teacher in the late 1940s and continued in the profession for over 30 years. History records that his teaching methods were unusual; taking a position at the notoriously progressive Summerhill in the early 1950s left a lasting impression. The bulk of his career, however, was spent at two London schools – Paddington Green and Fox Primary – and he would divide his working week between them. His lessons focused on drama and movement, encouraging creativity and improvisation from his pupils.

Cutler was proud of this work and explored ways of bringing it to television on a number of occasions. He wrote to Huw Wheldon in May 1964 proposing a BBC documentary about his teaching at Paddington, where, in his words, the aim is ‘to free the children so that they can grow.’ *Late Night Line-Up* paid a visit to his Fox class on 12 July 1965, for transmission four days later. Ian Keill’s quarter-hour film ‘Children Dancing’ was shown on two occasions. Cutler tried to interest the channel controllers in further screenings but it was not to be, and the film was not kept.

Later, ABC Television filmed a pilot in spring 1966 initially called *Cock-a-Doodle-Don’t* but referred to in some documents as *Jinx*. This was made with Fox pupils and appears not to have been transmitted or archived.

All of which means that the sole surviving footage of Ivor Cutler’s teaching practice is a half-hour programme for the London Weekend Television series *Alive and Kicking – British Poets*, initially broadcast in the capital at lunchtime

on 18 July 1971. Late night-screenings followed on HTV and weeks later on ATV, meaning it was little seen with just 50,000 viewers catching its first broadcast.

*Alive and Kicking* transfers the classroom to the television studio. Publicity for this final programme in the series noted that Cutler 'works a great deal with children, getting them interested in poetry, encouraging them to respond to imaginary situations, words and sounds, to improvise acting and poetry.' Unlike the preceding editions, this finale chooses to break away from the usual format in which presenter Adrian Mitchell introduced a poet who read their work and then took part in an interview. Ivor *does* perform his own work by way of interlude, but the strong emphasis on his pupils demonstrates that his teaching was viewed as a key component of his creative life.

## **South of Watford**

Arguably the most rewarding representation of Ivor Cutler's worldview on the small screen has been via documentary profile. Sympathetic producers such as Paul Spencer and Alison Pinkney made effective and affecting hour-long programmes in 2005 and 2020, but *South of Watford* on 9 May 1986 came first.

The series ran from 1983-88 and offered a view of contemporary art and culty fare in the capital and the south east of England. The archive of over 80 programmes is now an invaluable record of cultural life across the decade, with programmes about new fashion, the filofax, and the recently opened Barbican, not to mention the first full profiles of artists such as Leigh Bowery and Derek Jarman. Into this open-minded environment stepped Ivor Cutler.

Nigel Miller's film places the viewer in the artist's world, following him around town, to his favourite haunts as well as seeing him in concert. Presenter Hugh Laurie is welcomed into the inner sanctum of the Cutler home at Laurier Road, Parliament Hill. Look out for when the ice finally breaks.

**Ian Greaves**

## **Our panel**

**Ian Greaves** (chair) is a writer and researcher whose books include edited collections of writing by Dennis Potter, Jonathan Miller and N.F. Simpson. He has also contributed to BFI Screenonline and devised radio programmes about Douglas Adams and Dudley Moore. He has worked as consultant on many projects about television history, including BBC Four's fiftieth anniversary celebration of *Play for Today* (2020), and the current Raven Row gallery exhibition *People Make Television*. He is co-curator of the Eccentric Miscellany season.

**Angela Slaven** has been a film and television editor for over 30 years. She has worked on dramas such as *Taggart*, and award-winning feature documentaries, e.g. *Big Gold Dream* (dir. Grant McPhee), which won the Audience Award at the Edinburgh International Film Festival in 2015. She is a long time Ivor fan, and was delighted to be asked to edit *Ivor Cutler by KT Tunstall*, directed by Alison Pinkney, which was described by the *Guardian* as 'Sky Arts' beautiful, heartfelt love letter from the singer to the poet/singer/humorist'. Angela lives 0 miles from Glasgow.

**Lucian Randall** is a writer and editor in London. He wrote *Ginger Geezer: The Life of Vivian Stanshall* (4th Estate, 2001) with Chris Welch and *Disgusting Bliss: the Brass Eye of Chris Morris* (Simon & Schuster, 2010).

**William Fowler** is a film archivist and writer, and co-curator of this season. He is Curator of Artists' Moving Image at the BFI National Archive where he acquires, restores and curates films. His co-authored book *The Bodies Beneath: The Flipside of British Film and Television* was published by Strange Attractor Press in 2019 and *People Make Television*, a gallery show about British public access television which he co-curated, opened at Raven Row in January. In 2012, he oversaw the restoration and curation of a number of films made by and starring artist eccentric Bruce Lacey, working across the BFI and Camden Arts Centre, and collaborating with Jeremy Deller.

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**ALIVE AND KICKING – BRITISH POETS:  
IVOR CUTLER AND FRIENDS**

*Director:* David J. Chapman  
*Production Company:* LWT  
*Executive Producer:* Francis Coleman  
*Designer:* Andrew Gardner  
*Presenter:* Adrian Mitchell  
*With:*  
Ivor Cutler  
ITV tx 18.7.1971  
25 mins

**SOUTH OF WATFORD: IVOR CUTLER**

*Director:* Nigel Miller  
*Production Company:* LWT  
*Producer:* Nigel Miller  
*Series Producer:* John Carlaw  
*Editor:* Michael Chaplin  
*Presenter:* Hugh Laurie  
ITV tx 9.5.1986  
28 mins

Total running time: 110 mins

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**IVOR CUTLER AND THE ECCENTRIC MISCELLANY**

**Ivor Cutler and Friends + panel discussion**  
Sat 4 Mar 16:10  
**Vivian Stanshall + intro by Lucian Randall,**  
**Vivian Stanshall biographer**  
Tue 7 Mar 18:15  
**Bruce Lacey, The Alberts and more + intro by William Fowler,**  
**BFI Archive Curator**  
Thu 9 Mar 20:45  
**Margaret Rutherford and Friends + intro by Claire Mortimer,**  
**author of *Spinsters, Widows and Chars***  
Wed 15 Mar 18:15

**IN PERSON & PREVIEWS**

**TV Preview: Inside No. 9 + Q&A with Steve Pemberton, Reece Shearsmith and Adam Tandy**  
Mon 6 Mar 18:15  
**WOW Festival Presents Prima Facie + panel discussion**  
Wed 8 Mar 18:15  
**Preview: Winners + Q&A with director Hassan Nazer**  
Thu 9 Mar 18:15  
**Mark Kermode Live in 3D at the BFI**  
Mon 13 Mar 18:30  
**Preview: Rye Lane + Q&A with director Raine Allen-Miller**  
Monday 13 March 20:45

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