



Previews and Events

Daniel Farson

In Person & Previews

TV Preview: How to Get to Heaven from Belfast
+ Q&A

Tue 10 Feb 18:15

Valentine's Day: Three Coins in the Fountain

Sat 14 Feb 14:30

Valentine's Day: Portrait of a Lady on Fire

Portrait de la jeune fille en feu

Sat 14 Feb 17:50

Valentine's Day: 35th Anniversary Screening:

Mississippi Masala

Sat 14 Feb 20:40

MilkTea presents – UK Premiere: Last Days

+ Q&A with director Justin Lin and actor Sky Yang

Tue 17 Feb 18:00

The World of Black Film Weekend: Malcolm X

+ intro by Ashley Clark

Fri 20 Feb 18:30

The World of Black Film Weekend: Black Girl +

Jemima + Johnny + intro by Ashley Clark

Sat 21 Feb 15:15

The World of Black Film Weekend: West Indies:

The Fugitive Slaves of Liberty + intro by

Ashley Clark

Sun 22 Feb 15:10

TV Preview: Bridgerton part two

+ Q&A with cast and creator (tbc)

Tue 24 Feb 18:10

Preview: Resurrection

Wed 25 Feb 19:00

Doctor Who Special Edition: Warriors of the

Deep + Q&A with actors Peter Davison and

Janet Fielding

Sat 28 Feb 12:00

Restored Special: Gamera Trilogy

Sat 28 Feb 16:00, 18:15, 20:40

KINOTEKA Gala screening: Franz

+ Q&A with director Agnieszka Holland

Tue 3 Mar 17:30 BFI IMAX

International Women's Day: 40th anniversary

screening: Working Girls + intro

Sun 8 Mar 15:15

Mark Kermode Live in 3D at the BFI

Mon 9 Mar 18:30 BFI IMAX

TV Preview: Big Mood Series 2

+ Q&A with Cast and Creator

Tue 17 Mar 18:30

Daniel Farson's Guide to Britain: Volume 1 is available on dual format (BFI Blu-ray and DVD) from 16 February

+ intro by Matthew Sweet

While only a relatively small number survive, it is estimated that Daniel Farson made more than a hundred television items between 1957 and 1964. It is little wonder, then, that he became so well known, practically the face of the 'non-BBC' London channel: a sort of Louis Theroux for the 1950s and early 1960s, guiding the viewer through new, unfamiliar, divisive subjects.

Born in 1927, Farson began his career in print journalism, in part apeing his American father Negley Farson, who wrote adventure books and acted as an international correspondent for a range of news publications. Farson Junior's press work continued over the years, notably with the advent of the colour supplement, but it was his opportunity to appear on television that really transformed his prospects, despite his considerable initial nerves.

Farson shot items for Associated-Rediffusion's current affairs programme *This Week* (which began in 1956), including *Teenage Girls* (23 January 1958) and *Soho Striptease Clubs* (24 April 1958), while also appearing as the 'authority' on lively quiz show *Double Your Money* (which had first aired in 1955). That was where Associated-Rediffusion features head Caryl Doncaster saw him, and decided to put him on the weekly payroll and increase his rate. Suddenly, he was appearing on multiple shows, often shaping and writing the programmes too. His visibility, and thus his fame, increased overnight – he was simply very good at this stuff. A steady hand ensured the shows worked and Farson adopted a progressive approach in, among others, the interview-based discussion programme *People in Trouble* (1958). Challenging views and subjects that included *Unmarried Mothers* (30 April 1958), *Mixed Marriages* (21 May 1958), *Ex-Prisoners* (28 May 1958) and *Suicides* (11 June 1958) beamed into people's homes, often for the very first time.

All was change – or so it often seemed. The Suez Crisis of 1956, in which Britain's place in the world withered and a new anti-American feeling took hold, triggered a loss of confidence and an unstable economy. London was still in ruins too; a point raised in the *Cats* episode (3 December 1959) of *Farson's Guide to the British* (1959-1960), in which two women describe their attempts to feed the thousands of cats across the bombed and war-damaged remnants of the East End. There was a craving for programmes about real life and the new, eccentric turns of modern existence. Farson offered weird sociology by way of return. Items and programmes could be at once prosaic and salacious. Sadly, some wonderfully curious-sounding television films no longer appear to survive. I remain captivated by the thought of programmes on Scientology (in *Out of Step: Mind over Matter*, 9 October 1957) and the history and culture of the Thames (*Farson's Guide to the British: London River*, 2 July 1957).

Farson, the trusted hand and soothsayer, offered much respite, not least by way of his seminal *Out of Step* run. Weren't we all out of step? Well, not necessarily. The series, which covered everything from vegetarianism to UFOs (see *Other Worlds Are Watching Us*, 25 September 1957), *Nudism* (2 October 1957) and *Witchcraft* (4 December 1957), provided a balm of difference and distance, indirectly providing a kind of security while making the weird seem far less weird than it really was. Farson preached tolerance and open-mindedness while remaining endlessly curious and occasionally having fun; ensuring

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different audiences might still look and laugh but without being nasty. Just as the advertising industry began its cultural ascent, so questions of lifestyles and subcultural interest gained traction – partly by way of Farson's unique television work.

If Farson made being *Out of Step* more tolerable, his next series *Keeping in Step* (1958) demonstrated just how precarious, even hard work, being 'normal' could be. He adopted his usual, if now increasingly bemused, tone of sociological enquiry. How much does a wedding service cost? How much money do traders make in a single day at the Stock Exchange, and to what end, and how? These were sensitive questions for a London still hobbling into recovery. Observational footage – once again showing how strange our arcane rituals are – came juxtaposed with in-person interviews. The pronounced differences of class and lifestyle expectation zoomed jarringly into view, yet all these people appeared at once strange and keen to fit in – at least within their own particular habitus.

Farson held the line, however, acting as both friend and captivated interviewer, at least for the most part, no matter who the interviewee or what strange thing they practiced and did. Admittedly, he disbelieved the protestations of the financial traders when it came to their claims about their incomes, and he cast a suspicious eye over the UFO enthusiasts. Nevertheless, he still almost normalised the differences that emerged, presenting both a progressive and conservative influence. He somehow made the challenging appear far less challenging.

William Fowler, 'Daniel Farson: In Step' (extract), from *Daniel Farson's Guide to Britain: Volume 1* Blu-ray/DVD (BFI, 2026)

William Fowler is a BFI National Archive curator and co-author of *The Bodies Beneath: The Flipside of British Television*