



OUR STRAIGHT/ MATES

BY MATTHEW MYERS



STAR MAN

Staring at the stars, says Professor Brian Cox, reveals great truths about our lives. But the big question is... Team *Trek* or Team *Star Wars*?

DNA: Your *Stargazing Live* TV show in Australia earlier this year set a new world record for people looking into the night sky.

Brian Cox: Yes, we did! I was amazed at the number of star parties around Australia. There were thousands! Virtually everywhere, people were participating to get the world record for the number of people looking up into the sky at any one time and it was achieved! When you see a whole country joining in astronomy it's wonderful. There were ten-year-old kids, some who will go into science and astronomy as a result of the *Stargazing Live* week. It may have been the first time they looked through a telescope, and those are the moments where I think it's more than just a TV show.

What can people expect from your *Universal World Tour* next year?

I talk about the questions that are genuinely existential in nature because I think astronomy and cosmology force you to confront such questions. It's undoubtedly true that we are, in one sense, absolutely insignificant in the face of the universe. We're one planet around one star among 250 billion stars, in one galaxy - among two trillion galaxies! But, in another sense, we know of nowhere else where life exists, and nowhere else where there's a civilization. That means there's nowhere else where things think. We're collections of atoms that think, and that could be an extremely rare phenomenon in the universe. That also means there's nowhere else in the universe that there's any meaning!

That's all quite deep, but you have an engaging way of explaining it.

I like to mix in very spectacular imagery, and I've managed to get the biggest LED screens available in Australia. The whole theatre wall will be a high-resolution LED screen. I'm also working with the company who did the graphics for the movie *Interstellar*. We simulate a black hole on stage using state-of-the-art graphics from that film. I'm also going to discuss what it's like to fall into a black hole, and Einstein's theory about space and time - what it tells us about the origins of the universe and its future. But, most interestingly, I talk about our place within it.

This is our Entertainment issue. What movies about the cosmos do you think get it right?

Interstellar really gets it right! One of the instigators heavily involved in the film was Kip Thorne, a Nobel Prize-winning physicist, and a world expert on gravity. In fact, the computer

code that we're using in my show to generate black holes is the same computer code Kip developed for *Interstellar*. He calculated all the things about being on a planet and orbiting around a black hole where one hour of time passes while seven years of time passes outside. *Interstellar* is a brilliant film because all the relativity is absolutely correct.

Any others?

I also love *2001: A Space Odyssey* because Stanley Kubrick wanted to make a film about the limitless possibilities humanity will open when we become a space-faring civilization, and that's exactly what he did. We're a very interesting and valuable part of the universe, but we've only just begun to take the first steps into it, and to understand it.

Team *Star Trek* or Team *Star Wars*?

That's a difficult question! I was nine when *Star Wars* came out and it dominated my life. I'm very fond of it but *Star Trek* has longevity and depth and a more complicated philosophy. Gene Roddenberry had an optimistic view of what our society could be like. If you look at the original *Star Trek* it does what great science fiction always does, which is to approach difficult contemporary subjects and sneak that discussion into public discourse. There was that classic episode with the people with half black, half white faces, and the great conflict it caused, including the threat to destroy their planet. Interestingly, you couldn't really tell the difference between these people at all. There's an obvious message, but for 1960s television in the US, it was incredibly powerful. Whoopi Goldberg has spoken passionately about the character of Uhura [played by Nichelle Nichols in the original series] being a black woman on the bridge of the *Enterprise*, and how she had a television character to aspire to.

Speaking of which, the current series, *Star Trek: Discovery*, has a gay couple.

Yes, it's brilliant. You have the central character who happens to be gay, but the plotlines are not about being gay. In the absolute spirit of *Star Trek* there is a series of characters playing pivotal roles that you can look up to and identify with. That's why it's a brilliant series.

You also had a role in *The Science Of Doctor Who*. Discuss!

Yes, I got to film in the TARDIS for a day with Matt Smith. I'm not an actor but the experience of standing in front of one, and getting a sense of what it's like, was wonderful. It's also the most amazing set, and it all works! You press the buttons and lights come on! I grew up with *Doctor Who* so it was quite an experience.

How about *Big Bang Theory*?

Again, it's another great piece of television. I don't know how accurate the portrayal of physicists is but there are definitely quite worldly theoretical physicists out there. So, in that sense, it's probably quite true! [Laughs.]

Have you been approached to guest star?

I haven't, but I live in hope. I've been in *Doctor Who* and I keep trying to manoeuvre myself to become an extra on *Star Wars*. I actually met JJ

IF YOU WERE GAY, WHO WOULD BE THE ONE?

Oh, there's a great number of attractive men out there. Obviously Brad Pitt [pictured in *Thelma And Louise*] was astonishing in his heyday. I'm a massive Bowie fan so I wouldn't say no to him.



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Abrams at a recent gig and suggested it would be a good idea if I were a storm trooper!

What do you remember of your days in the bands Dare and D:Ream?

I did Dare in the late '80s, which wasn't where I thought I'd end up! I was a big Duran Duran fan and then became a goth. I was also into Joy Division, The Smiths and other bands from Manchester, where I lived. I wanted to be in a band so I taught myself to play keyboards. Then I accidentally ended up in a rock band. It wasn't my kind of stuff, but we had a great time and made two albums and toured with the likes of Jimmy Page [Led Zeppelin]. I became sick of that, and got into astrophysics at the University Of Manchester, but needed a job so I began driving D:Ream around the country. When they got a record deal they asked me to play keyboards, so I accidentally joined D:Ream. London, at the time, was full of energy and D:Ream was a club band all about white label vinyl and 12-inch remixes. To be part of that scene in 1992 was very exciting and, in hindsight, a special time for music and popular culture.

Who is your musical diva?

I'm a huge Kate Bush fan, however, in terms of an absolute diva it would be Bernadette Peters. I went to Rockefeller University for a time in New York, which meant living on the Upper East Side. I went to a lot of Broadway shows and Bernadette Peters was in the revival of *Annie Get Your Gun*. She was brilliant! I went to see it about seven times. Bernadette Peters – you can't get any more diva-ish than her!

In 2009 you made *People's Sexist Men Alive*.

How did you feel about that?

I was very surprised because it's an American

magazine and I don't have the same kind of profile there, but it's a great accolade and, probably, my most treasured award!

You also have great hair. Almost Beatle-like!

Yeah, it evolved into that Manchester look, which is an echo of the '60s, but I got stuck in Manchester in the '90s! I don't know if I'm more Paul McCartney or Liam Gallagher!

Do you hang out with gay mates or family?

I have lots of gay friends and, it's the biggest cliché, but my hairdresser for the past 20 years is a gay friend. My haircut is really his creation and no one else has cut my hair since. His name is Stephen Glendinning and he's quite a famous stylist in Britain. I met him on a TV show and we've been friends ever since.

What would you say to a *Star Gazing Mardi Gras* float, right under the Sydney night sky?

That would be wonderful! As I said, astronomy and cosmology gives us great perspective. My hero, Carl Sagan, said one of the most valuable things about astronomy is that it gives us perspective in that we are a single civilization on a very fragile planet. Astronauts have always expressed how the moment they see the Earth they see it as one world and that's really the Mardi Gras message, isn't it? It's quite central to that idea that we are one people on one world together and that's a very astronomical perspective. A celebration of "one world" on a Mardi Gras float devoted to astronomy would fit perfectly.

Your favourite Bowie album is *Hunky Dory*, which includes *Life On Mars*. Have you heard Streisand's version? Bowie said it was "bloody atrocious"!

No, I haven't, but there's a great version of *Life On Mars* in the Bowie musical *Lazarus*. That whole musical is brilliant. It's hard to do a great Bowie cover because they are such definitive songs, but I'm going to listen to the Streisand version now!

Last but not least, are you briefs, boxers or free-balling?

Boxer briefs because I find they're the most comfortable.

MORE: Tickets for Professor Brian Cox Universal World Tour are on sale from 22 October. Go to lateralevents.com