

David McCallum - Open Channel D

The voice at the end of the line is actorly and upbeat and unquestionably British. 'Hello! You come most carefully upon your hour!' It belongs to David McCallum, a '60s icon, a classically-trained musician, a man with implausible reserves of charm and, evidently, a great fondness for Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. As voices go, it's unnervingly familiar - rather like that of an old friend you forgot you had - with an endearing habit of drifting away from Received Pronunciation into a slightly summery West Coast twang. This presumably, results from McCallum's lengthy stints in Hollywood and the fact that New York is now his adopted home. Yet many people are still convinced that David, now an unlikely 62, is a Russian - or, to be crushingly exact, a Russian-born naturalised American, who goes around foiling the attempts of the insidious THRUSH organisation to attain world domination. 'I do still get asked whether I'm originally from the former U.S.S.R.,' he laughs. 'I always say, yes.'

This confusion is understandable - particularly when there's evidence from the highest authority that McCallum is inseparable from Illya Kuryakin, the legendary character he played between 1964 and 1967 in the cult U.S. TV series, *The Man From U.NCLE*. 'Yes, Kuryakin was me,' says David, with a contradictory logic that's the only way to come to terms with a publicly enforced alter-ego of 30 years' standing. 'The two characters, myself and Illya, are one and the same. There is no distinction. The difference is that I go about using my brains, and he went about using words on the script. But we shared the same body, the same face the same hair.' And, of course, the same effortless '60s cool, a horn-rimmed heaven of tightly-fitting suits and white raincoats, crisp white shirts and thin black ties.

Born in Glasgow in 1933, McCallum was 31 when he won the role that would make him an International star. Previously, he'd spent more than a decade playing juvenile roles in film and on stage on both sides of the Atlantic. *The Man From U.NCLE* was commissioned by the Hollywood film giant, MGM, in an attempt to capitalise on the explosion of interest in corny spy thrillers which had followed the phenomenal early '60s success of the first three 'Bond' films. Illya was an inspired piece of casting: America was reeling from the recent impact of the Beatles, and McCallum, with his English accent (inflected with a hint of Moscow for the part), sandy mop-top, boyish frame, and black roll-neck sweater, perfectly mirrored the image of the British Invasion.

Neatly bookended by the rise of the Fab Four, and the psychedelic era of Vietnam demonstrations and acid rock, *The Man From U.NCLE* was conceived in a period of enormous and unprecedented optimism. It only made sense, then, that MGM should surf the wave before it crashed, and so they approached McCallum with a view to launching him toward the pop charts. Initially, he was persuaded to cut a novelty record called 'Communication', which was issued by Capitol and reached No. 32 in the U.K. chart. This was followed by another single, 'In The Garden, Under The Tree', to coincide with the U.S. release of a romantic comedy, *Three Bites Of The Apple*.

After that, things moved fast, as the actor explains: 'MGM came and said to me, with the success of *UNCLE*, you ought to sing a whole album of songs. I said I'm an actor, not a singer. They said, well, just read the telephone book or something and we'll put music to it. I found that somewhat reprehensible.'

Instead, McCallum went away and came up with the idea of recording an LP of classical arrangements of contemporary chart hits. What most actors know about music can be written on the back of an Equity card, but McCallum had actually studied classical composition at the Royal Academy of Music, under his father, also called David. McCallum senior was a respected instrumentalist, who played violin and conducted in a variety of prestigious British orchestras, including the Scottish Orchestra and the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra.

Later, his father was one of the 40 musicians assembled in February 1967 to perform on the Beatles' groundbreaking *Sgt Pepper* track, 'A Day In The Life'. Producer George Martin related this story: 'The Beatles asked me, and the musicians, to wear full evening dress, which we did. I left the studio at one point, and came back to find one of the musicians, David McCallum, wearing a red clown's nose. Everyone was wearing carnival novelties... I just fell around laughing.'

'My father was indeed a great comedian,' his son recalls. 'There's one famous guitar player who uses a bow... what's his name?' Eddie Phillips from the Creation? 'No... Jimmy Page! My father suggested to him that he do it. Whenever Jimmy Page is around, he always talks about my father.'

With this pedigree, it's not surprising that David McCallum Jnr relished the chance of scoring his favourite pop hits by the likes of the Animals, the Rolling Stones and Beatles, as well as writing some originals for the occasion. The sessions took place in the evenings after he'd finished shooting *UNCLE*, and McCallum says he's still got photos of himself conducting the orchestra in Illya's suit and tie.

His collaborator on the project was soul maestro and Capitol arranger H.B. Barnum, with whom he scored the music at the latter's piano. McCallum wanted simply to use woodwind and four French horns, but when he arrived at the studio, Barnum had added electric guitars and a rhythm section. Today, the results sound fantastic - classic uptempo Easy Listening, comprising '60s pop music attacked by classical musicians with a zealous desire to expose the beauty of its delicious melodies and the power of its beat.

Believe me, this CD, culled from McCallum's two 1966 Capitol LP's, *MUSIC... A Part Of Me* and *MUSIC... A Bit More Of Me*, is the kind of sublime, sun-kissed soundtrack-music that can turn winter into spring and night into day. The moments that aren't, like 'Insomnia' and the demonic version of 'The Batman Theme', offer instead a kind of intoxicating abandonment that far too many guitar groups failed to offer. Rock'n'roll? Who needs it?

'Those sessions were so much fun,' recalls McCallum, who, as a very busy man and much-loved actor, is someone with little time for nostalgia. 'My father played on some of them - he was touring the States with the RPO at the time, and popped in. That period was so exciting, and that music is still unique and very expressive. I remember getting up at six in the morning, driving to the studio as the sun rose, and driving off to the recordings when the sun set. It was wonderful.'

And what of being a living legend? 'I find that all rather ridiculous,' he says. 'But it's nice to be remembered affectionately. If people feel that way, I'll gladly accept their idolatry.'