

DOWN TO EARTH WITH RIN HOOPER

It was while attending Princeton that Ron Harper (Born Jan 12, 1936.) learned the skills that would prove invaluable in later life. When a chance meeting with renowned scientist, Albert Einstein resulted in the advice. *"For a happy life, you should do what most you enjoy."* plans to become an attorney were quickly forgotten and he embarked upon an acting career.

Studying with Lee Strasberg his budding career was soon interrupted when he found himself drafted into the Navy. Only after being discharged was he able to return to his acting studies.

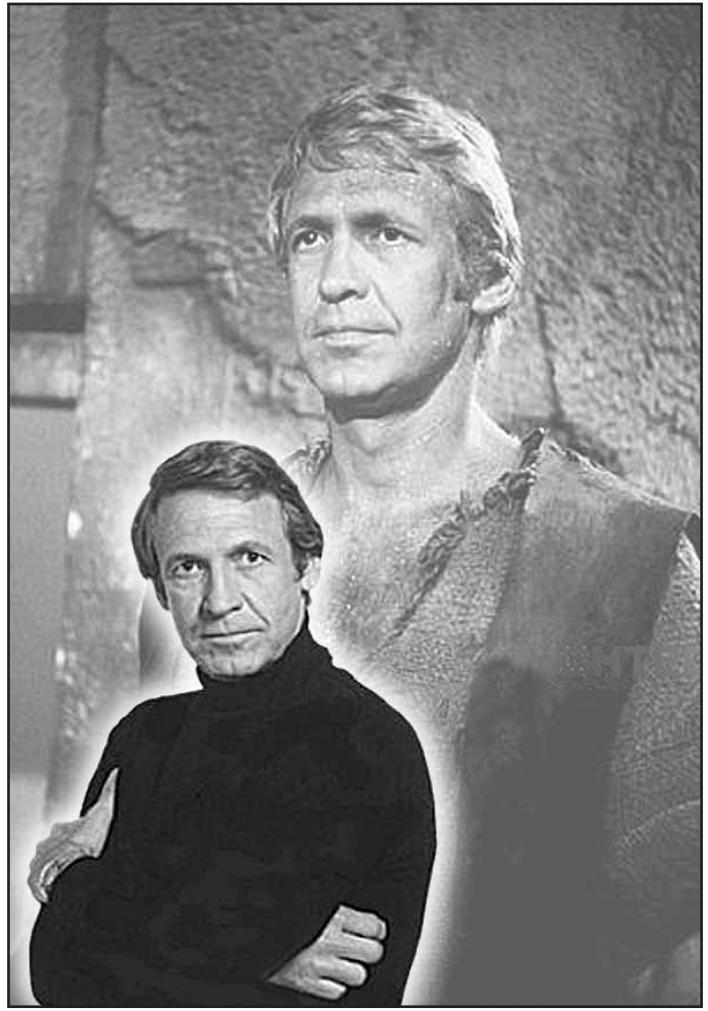
He was signed by Universal for a 3 year contract that guaranteed him three pilots. The first was *"87th Precinct"* and so his television career began.

With six TV shows to his credit he is still best remembered (in the US) as Lt. Craig Garrison in the critically acclaimed *"Garrison's Gorillas"*. After 'GG' had run it's course Ron felt ready to settle down and marry and it was while on honeymoon that a call came to test for the part of Colonel Alan Viridon.

Ron then joined the cast of *"Land of the Lost"* and shortly after embarked on the soap opera phase of his career, with parts in, *"Love of Life"* and *"Another World."* He has since guest starred on many other prime time shows such as; *"Hill St. Blues"*, *"Beverly Hills 90210"*, *"Melrose Place"*, *"Walker Texas Ranger"* and *"The Equaliser"*. He also narrated the BBC docudrama, *"Disaster: The Unflyable Plane."*

Feature film appearances include: *"Splendour in the Grass"*, *"Savage Season"*, *"The Soldier"*, *"Freedom Strike"*, *"The Odd Couple II"* and *"Venom"*

Ron now resides in California with his daughter, Nicole.



THEN & NOW

Thank you for agreeing to be the star of this issue of Simian Scrolls.

RH: You're very welcome!

Can we start with the early years?

RH: Sure.

You wanted to be a lawyer?

RH: That's right. Well, actually, I wanted to be a cowboy. But I had a scholarship to Princeton. Thank goodness, what a wonderful school. While I was there I thought, *"Well, I don't want to waste my college education on acting"* (little did I know), so I thought I'd go to Harvard Law and become an attorney and you know, live that kind of life. But Princeton was wonderful. I'd always loved acting. In high school I was in the senior play, the junior play, the high school play. And when I got to Princeton, I was in some theatrical productions there. Theatre On Team, which is a little theatre there. And Triangle Show, which is a musical comedy show.

So as a scholarship student I was required to work during the summer and make \$400 - \$500 to supplement the rest of my income. Then the producer of the summer theatre there, called the University Players, invited me to come and join the summer theatre company there, which did about 10 plays, one a week. Rehearsed one during

the day and put another play on at night. We'd end with Shakespeare and usually start with Tennessee Williams.

So I thought about it and I said, *"I'd love to but I'm supposed to work and earn some money"*. And the theatre didn't pay us any money, I think we got a daily allowance for food and we stayed in one of the clubs there so we didn't have to pay any room and board. So I went to the Dean of Admissions and told him the situation.

He said, *"Would you like to do that?"*

I said, *"Yeah, but I won't be able to earn any money"*.

So he said, *"Well, here the purpose of a college education, at least how it should be, is to learn how to best enjoy the rest of your life. That's to help you find out. And so, if this will help you find that out, how to best enjoy the rest of your life, we'll consider it part of your curriculum, we'll increase your scholarship, and if you need a student loan after that, you'll be entitled to it"*.

So I thought that was wonderful. I did a season of University Players, everything from Tennessee Williams, *"Camino Real"* and ended up with Shakespeare's, *"The Tempest"*, and did all these plays in between and it was terrific.

The following summer I came back and did another season of summer stock, we were about 45 minutes from New York, various people came down and saw me in productions, encouraged me to come to New York. And I went to New York, started studying with Lee Strasberg. And had an offer to go to Harvard for a law fellowship,

THE TV SERIES

So moving on then to the Planet of the apes TV show... What went wrong?

There should have been much more imagination. It was a one idea show and once we got past that one idea, the actors and more importantly, the audience, had seen it all. Our story was one of us would get captured and the other two would have to rescue him. It got to the point where Jim (Naughton) and I would pick up a script each week and the first words out of our mouth would be 'whose turn is it to be rescued this week...?'

What direction would you have liked it to have taken?

RH: More imagination, more sensitivity and more depth to the characters. We went in with the idea that it would probably be an action adventure series and that became more obvious as the season progressed. The scripts were emphasising action and interaction with the apes rather than deep storylines. The producers would get awfully upset if we didn't have some kind of action going in the first five pages of a script.

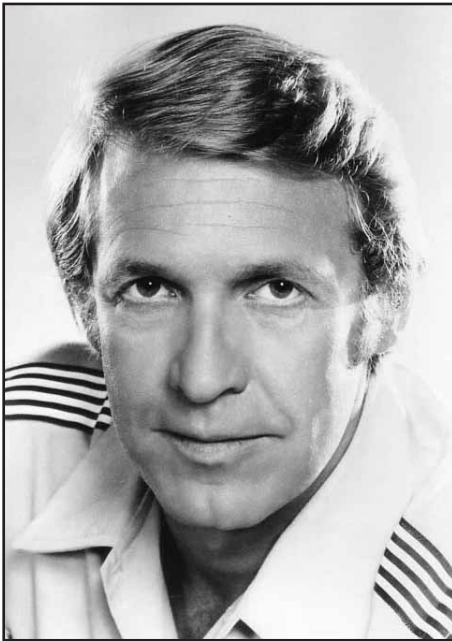
Were you ever told of any potential outcomes for any of the characters?

No, all we were told was that if the ratings didn't pick up, we were all going back to the unemployment lines. Personally I think that eventually they managed to get back to their own time.

After landing the part of Virдон you then tested with a number of actors up for the part of Pete Burke - do you remember any details?

RH: I don't remember names but there were some very good actors that they brought in from New York to test for the part. Jim Naughton was chosen but we didn't become very close during the making of the show. I think a big part of that was the result of us not being together very long. We respected each other as actors but, away from the set, he was a little cool.

Jim's part was originally intended to be funnier than what he turned it into. The producers conceived of the role of Pete as a comedic foil for my character since they didn't really need two heroes in the show. But I don't



decided I wanted to be an actor, that was it.

I studied with Lee Strasberg for about a year and a half, was drafted into the Navy, came back out of the Navy, studied with him a couple of more years.

Well, that's how I got out of being a lawyer.

So tell us about Ron Harper now, in his own words.

RH: I am much too complex (or some say convoluted) a person for someone as simple-minded as myself to comprehend - let alone verbalise.

Who do you admire? Who are your heroes?

RH: George Washington. He was a wealthy Virginia planter who took on the seemingly impossible task of opposing the world's greatest empire with a ragtag band of farmers.- Thomas Jefferson. I liked it when he said "I have sworn upon the altar of God, eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man." - Benjamin Franklin. I admired his imagination and his lust for life. - Albert Einstein whom I had the pleasure of meeting; a very sweet guy. - My father who was one of the gentlest and kindest men I ever knew.

How do you like to relax?

RH: Reading, gardening and I dabble with the paint brush. Still lifes, landscapes, portraits, abstracts and primitive landscapes. Especially of my childhood in Turtle Creek.

Before Star Wars or LOTR you were the man with his face on your very own doll. How did that feel?

RH: My daughter was very impressed. Me, I thought it was a bit "plastic".





think Jim was interested in playing the comic guy which had to make his stay on the show a little uncomfortable.

He's a very good singer. But he doesn't have that much of a light touch. So instead of having something that we could have bounced off of each other, it was really like two heroes and was less interesting. Pete Burke when originally conceived was a very reluctant hero. He didn't want to risk his life for anybody, including apes. He just wanted to get back into his spacecraft and get back to Earth leaving the heroics to somebody else. Pete Burke as it evolved was very heroic and I think we missed some opportunity to take some lighter touches. I always try to find humour in drama and drama in humour. I didn't dislike him, but we weren't very close. We worked together but never saw each other after socially.

Do you have a personal favourite episode?

RH: *The Horse Race* was a wonderful satire and, by comparison to other episodes, it had some bulk to it. Humans were not able to ride horses but Viridon could and so the apes were trying all sorts of tricks to keep him from winning the race. But of course none of it worked. I also liked *The Legacy* because I got to be more diverse in my acting style. I was able to show some of my humanity. That was a welcome break from the usual requirements of the scripts we got.

Then there was *Tomorrow's Tide* - except it had the phoniest looking shark I've ever seen - It was a plastic shark with a tiny propeller that was visible. Jim and I had to be filmed underwater being menaced by it. We had to go down 35 feet into the ocean, with lead weights tied to our rags, wearing a mask and a breathing device. They brought in the cameras and the mechanical shark. At the director's signal we had to take off the mask and swim around and try to act. They figured they would save air by starting us at the bottom rather than having us free dive into the water first. But it was real cold and, after a couple of hours, they basically had to haul us out because we were close to getting hypothermia.

And then there was "*The Good Seeds*", which was the first one we shot, where I'm teaching this farm family about farming. Because, you know, Viridon was a rancher and a farmer. That didn't go anywhere. CBS wanted that action, "get those apes shootin' at those boys! Put some sharks in the water."

Was it disappointing when CBS cancelled?

RH: It was disappointing because it really should have and could have been, much more than it was.

Do you feel this was a premature decision?

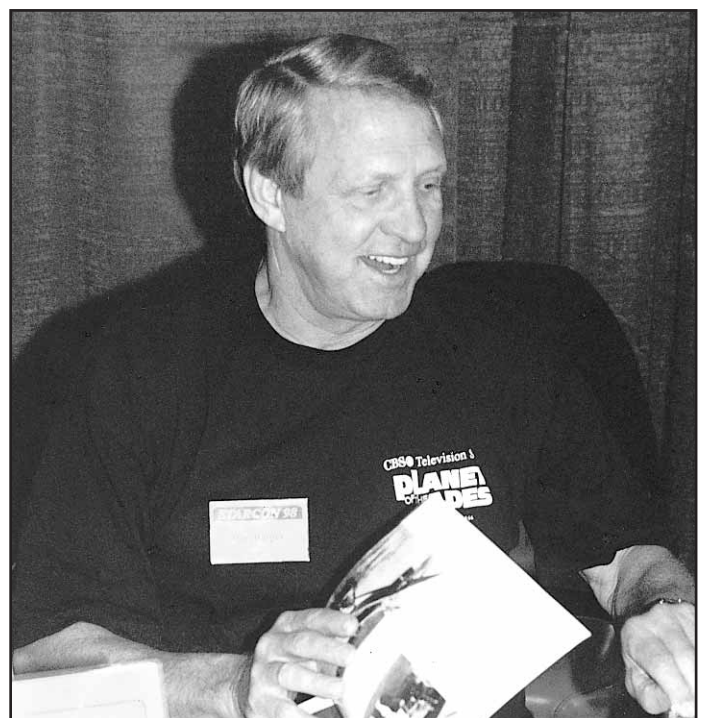
RH: No, I don't. The reason for stopping was that our ratings were down and the reason that happened is that we kept doing the same story over and over again. You need a lot of imagination to keep Science Fiction going and our writers only seemed to be able to come up with the same storyline over and over again. After a while there was a real sense on the set that this show was not long for this world. There was shock and despair and I think that came with much reluctance because everybody had such high hopes for the series. The feeling on the set was 'What happened here? This was supposed to have been an automatic three-year run.'

Were you disappointed that there was never any closure for the story?

RH: Our producers, I think, never believed that the show - so hyped and shot without a pilot - was really going to be cancelled. So they wanted to leave their options open. They even did the last two episodes after the network told them to stop. I liked (producer) Stan Hough, who's no longer with us. He was a pretty good producer. And I don't know if it was him or the network that couldn't find more imaginative writers.

So what then is the secret of a good series?

RH: There's no question about it: the writing. Writing and the casting.





Mark Lenard, had an option for writing/directing. Did you have any similar arrangements?

RH: We talked about the possibility of my directing, in the future. I was very fond of Mark. He was a very good actor, had a beautiful voice. He was in my voiceover agency, too, after that. Well, the other funny thing is, you know, I never knew what he looked like until the show was over. We went to our wrap party or something. I hardly knew what any of the apes looked like because by the time I got in around 7 o'clock, they'd been in makeup since about 4:30. So I could hardly see him. I loved his voice and thought he was a very good actor.

In "The Legacy" and "The Cure" - Virdon nearly has a relationship with a female character. Would you have liked to have shaken off the marital shackles once in a while? (We should point out that James Naughton only ever kissed - or came close to kissing - Chimpanzees).

RH: I did NOT have sexual relations with THAT woman or any of the primates. LOL

Did it feel like a "big budget" environment.

RH: No. It was a very difficult show to make. We were given seven days to do an episode but, I swear, some weeks it felt like we were knocking them out in five days or less. The human beings in this show never rode horses and so we were always running and always being chased by the apes. Some directors, particularly if a script was a little thin, would say, 'Okay, go out there about 2-300 yards and run into the camera'.

Did this punishing schedule harm the overall product?

RH: It was hard on the actors but not nearly as bad as the writing.

Did you have any idea the frenzy of public interest there was in the UK for the series at the time?

RH: I had *no* idea. Damn, we should have made it a British production.

Was one person responsible for the stories or were writers free to come up with their own ideas (there were some specific threads - eg 'the disc' - that seemed to be leading somewhere).

RH: I have a feeling the stories were "suggested" by the producers and if one of your producers left - the disc thread, for example (which I believe was a good one) - it left with him.

What are your recollections of the much-missed, Roddy McDowall?

RH: One of the sweetest guys I ever worked with. I still have the director's chair he gave me. He deliberately had the name misspelled. *Rin Hooper*. (He corrected this later on)

I admired the stamina of the actors playing the apes. The make-up and costumes were really hot. Jim and I were running around in next to nothing and we were uncomfortable so you can only imagine what Roddy and Mark were going through. But Roddy had been through this ape stuff before so it didn't really surprise him.





Were you ever tempted to try on the ape make-up yourself?

RH: NO! I wasn't. Poor Roddy had to spend three and a half-hours every morning getting into it.

What does it mean to you that a part you played so long ago is still appreciated by dedicated fans.

RH: I am honoured and humbled.

Do you ever catch the show on TV?

RH: Yes, some of them I find a pleasure to watch again.

Would be interested in revisiting Colonel Alan Virдон?

RH: Sure I would make myself available for such a project... Unless it was to be directed by Tim Burton.

What does your daughter make of it all? Seeing her Father on TV talking to men in rubber monkey masks?

RH: My daughter sees me talking to aliens and other imaginary people all the time.

You have promoted POTA quite extensively at shows. Were you surprised at the number of POTA fans you've met?

RH: Yes. I had no idea that the show has such a large following.

Do fans ever tend to confuse Ron Harper with Colonel Virдон or Lt. Garrison?

RH: No. I would have to say that they are more interested in me as an actor than as any of my characters in my six series. I don't believe they confused me with either Virдон or Garrison.

What's the strangest thing you've ever been asked to autograph?

RH: A polo ball. I was watching a polo match with Aldo Gucci and he asked me to sign the polo ball.

Your daughter comes up to you and says "Daddy, I want to be an actress." Would you tell her "For a happy life, you should do what most you enjoy." or pile furniture high against her door and let her out only when she's regained her senses?

RH: I would want her to do what she most enjoys.

Do you have a personal message for our readers?

RH: I am flattered and honoured by your interest.

Mr Harper, Thank you again for taking the time help us with "Simian Scrolls". May I take this opportunity to offer best wishes from us all.

RH: Right back at ya and to all the POTA fans.

Sincerely,
Ron Harper

Thanks to our following friends for their gracious help with this interview:

Kassidy Rae: For setting wheels in motion.

Debbie Engel: For keeping wheels well greased.

Michael Whitty: For sharing.

Jeff Krueger: For coming to our rescue

One Step Beyond... For more info on Ron Harper (and the chance to purchase some exclusive memorabilia) those with Internet connections might like to point their browsers at:

<http://www.geocities.com/rhfc2002>

Additionally if you just want to be in touch with other fans you'll find a warm welcome awaits at the following group:

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/ronharperfanclub2000/>

To write to Ron (and while you're at it make sure to ask his agent when we'll be seeing him next) you need to contact:

Michael Zanuck,
Zanuck Passon Pace,
Inc. Talent Agency,
4717 Van Nuys Blvd.
Suite 102, Sherman Oaks, CA 91403

For the sake of completion some parts of this interview have been augmented with quotes from TV Zone Special #17 ("Lost Voyagers Special"), June 1995 interview conducted by Marc Shapiro).