



THE BIRTH OF The Sky at Night

Discover how an obscure documentary on UFOs led to one of the longest-running TV series in UK history

In October 1956, Patrick Moore was anxiously awaiting the verdict from a board of TV executives following his appearance on a one-off BBC documentary about UFOs. *Flying Saucers* – *Do They Exist?* has since been left to

languish in the BBC's archives, but it was this obscure documentary that would launch Patrick's broadcasting career, and with it the longest-running programme with the same presenter: *The Sky at Night*. The following letters – copies of the

original correspondence between Patrick and Paul Johnstone, *The Sky at Night's* original producer – chart the birth of this iconic TV show, originally pitched as *Stars Of The Month*, from a concept to its launch as the BBC's foremost astronomy series. ▶

1956 October 17

Paul Johnstone, Esqre.,
B.B.C Television Studios,
Lime Grove, W.12.

Dear Mr. Johnstone,

I was very glad to see you to-day: I hope that the saucer programme will be a success!

One thing has struck me forcefully. Much play is made of the fact that Saucers have been said to affect radar: this is in fact one of the "strong points" of the Saucer enthusiasts. I feel that it would be a good thing to bring in a radar expert, who could demonstrate the effects upon radar screens and show that other things besides Saucers can be recorded. There would seem to be great visual scope here.

If you think that the suggestion is sound, I imagine that the Radar Society would help.

With regard to the other suggestion I made to you: I mentioned it then, simply because I am certain that someone will start a Stars of the Month programme before long either on B.B.C. or I.T.A. It has been a popular feature on sound radio, and TV scope is clearly immense. I would be very grateful if you would let me know if the B.B.C. would even consider the idea; frankly I would like to approach the I.T.A. if the reaction is unfavourable, and I would like to do it soon.

The other scheme I did mean to suggest was a series devoted to practical astronomy, giving people ideas as to how they themselves can take up astronomy as a hobby and do observational work - but I gather that you already have a series in view. As I see it, there is great scope for a programme of this sort; there are many people who would rather learn what to look for on the Moon, by using a small telescope, than to hear about remote galaxies!

I probably feel strongly upon this point because I receive so much correspondence about it. When my book "The Amateur Astronomer" comes out next year, I shall be rather tempted to refer questioners to it; but I suppose that is a lazy way of doing things.

I look forward to hearing from you. Meanwhile I will contact you if I have any further suggestions on the Saucer programme. I will contact Desmond as soon as he gets back from Africa.

Yours sincerely,

Patrick Moore

12 Nov 1956: Patrick lets on that the Independent Television Authority has been putting out 'feelers'

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6th December 1956

Dear Patrick,

Thank you very much for your letter and for the books. The programme seems to have gone down much better than we expected immediately afterwards, in spite of Desmond's slowness, and has obviously aroused a tremendous amount of interest.

The head of our Department approved of your performance and thinks that there is a big future for "Stars of the Month". She is discussing the project with the chief planner on Friday, so I will telephone you on Monday with the result.

I think it looks pretty promising although the date on which it would be starting may be a little uncertain.

I have returned the photographs today under separate cover and thank you once again for all your good work in connection with the programme.

Yours
Paul Johnstone

4 6 Dec 1956: With Patrick's UFO show success, Stars of the Month looks likely

BBC

1 17 Oct 1956: Patrick sets out his case for a new astronomy show, Stars of the Month

19th October 1956

Dear Mr Moore,

Thank you for your letter. I think the Radar Society is a good idea and I will get in touch with them.

I have put up the "Stars of the Month" to our Planners and I have no doubt that if it comes off it could well lead to bigger things. For instance, when we do our next big series on astronomy you might well be the Glyn Daniel, introducing the appropriate experts, etc. However, this does depend, firstly on your performance in the flying Saucers programme and secondly, on your not deciding to go to ITA in the meantime. I hope you think it responsible that the Planners should postpone their decision until after they have seen you playing a major part in a programme, and I hope also that you will be prepared to wait until then, as I very much agree with you that there is a considerable future for astronomy on television.

Yours sincerely,
Paul Johnstone

2 19 Oct 1956: Paul Johnstone reminds Patrick that he still has to prove himself

1956 November 12

Paul Johnstone, Esqre.,
Lime Grove.

Dear Mr. Johnstone,

I have been giving a great deal of thought to the Saucer programme on December 4, and as time is growing short I think it best to write to you to find out what progress has been made.

I saw R.A. Smith the other day, and I gathered you were seeing him this week; also that he was willing to join the programme.

Did you contact the Radar Society? I feel that this is important. We must also get a good photographer; moreover I have some skillfully-faked pictures which may well be useful, so if you have contacted a photographic expert I would like to see him as soon as possible. With regard to the astronomical aspect: I suggest that I handle this, as there will be little time to spare to bring in more people. You may however consider that it is worthwhile to get a biologist to show that the idea of human beings on Venus or Mars is quite untenable; if not, I can incorporate this into my own section. A biologist would of course give added weight to this vital point, but I do not know what you feel about it.

I am wondering whether you would like me to drop in some time in the near future to discuss further points. I am often in London, so I could manage almost any time, provided that I have a few days notice.

I hope all is well with you.

Yours sincerely

Patrick Moore

Patrick Moore

P.S. In confidence, one of the I.T.A. people contacted me recently. I said nothing whatever about the Dec. 4 programme, about which they presumably do not know; and nor did I respond to 'feelers' about the two other suggestions I made to you. As I said, I will do nothing about this until after the Dec. 4 programme. Until you have seen this, you naturally will not know whether I am of any use on television.

“I have no doubt that if it comes off it could well lead to bigger things” – Paul Johnstone

5 9 Dec 1956: A delighted Patrick vows to start work on the first episode immediately

1956 Dec. 9.

Paul Johnstone, Esqre.,
B.B.C Television Studios,

Dear Paul,

It was very good of you to ring to-day to tell me the decision about "Stars of the Month". Needless to say, I am delighted at the result!

I imagine that there will be plenty of time to discuss details before the first programme; I will therefore wait to hear from you, and meanwhile I will work on material to submit.

I am very grateful indeed for your help and interest – I only hope I shall be able to repay in some measure by doing a programme that you will like.

As ever
Patrick

Patrick

12th December 1956

Dear Patrick,

Thank you for your letter. I am very glad that "Stars of the Month" has been accepted. The Director of Programmes is very enthusiastic about it and in particular wants us to have a camera on the roof doing direct observation whenever weather and other circumstances permit. The programme will be a 15 minutes one, monthly, indefinitely, providing the standard is maintained. The only question is when can it start. The programmes are already fully planned until the end of March, so it's a question of whether the Planners can find any studio space to fit us in. If they can't, we may have to wait until April, when the programme has a definite placing of its own. However, I am still hoping they will squeeze us in before then.

I will let you know, anyway, in due course, as soon as there is anything definite and we can then start discussing details.

Yours
Paul Johnstone

6 12 Dec 1956: Paul reveals a potential date for the first show – April 1957

PATRICK MOORE
TELEVISION (Talks)

35/DEK

9th April 57

Sir,

Stars of the Month

Television Studios

Dates & times to be arranged
Television Studios

April 24th
May 22nd
June 19th
July 17th
10.30-10.45 p.m.

Fee made up as follows:
Appearance £21.0.0
Provision of Materials etc. £ 5.0.0
£26.5.0

Paul Johnstone

Twenty-five guineas (£26.5.0) per programme

This fee to cover appearance as astronomer in 15 minute item, and provision of materials, photographs and diagrams and right to televise same in this programme.

Patrick Moore, Esq.,

Accepted

7 9 Apr 1957: Patrick's contract; the show was renamed before its first episode



▲ Patrick on the set of an early *The Sky at Night* broadcast, his idea now a reality