

# Ripples

By Alan Ozanne

I'm a streamer. That's all you really need to know about me. I can't tell you my name, or anything else, not after what I've done. Maybe once you broke something that belonged to someone else, and you couldn't fix it, couldn't pretend it was the same as it was before. You either had to confess your sins, or hide your guilt. That's what I chose to do. Hide. I mean, I broke things for a lot of people. And the worst thing about it is that they don't even know. But I do.

Streamer. We've been called a lot of things. In the early days there were lots of flying allusions – “time pilot”, “flux captains”, dignified and sober descriptions – “living archivist”, “chrono-journalist”, and the old simplistic clichés, too – “time traveler”. Now there are other words. Vandal. Mercenary. Terrorist. Even, murderer.

You probably know the history, of course. How time travel moved very quickly from quantum theory to a practical application. I wasn't really involved back then, I knew a few people that worked in the field, but it was all about science and calculations, very dry stuff. In the beginning, you might remember, the government described the projects as “a window on history”, developing the idea that time was fixed and immutable, that there could be no paradox, no rewrites, no changes. Just observation and study. Safe.

Then we had that incident with the President – I know you remember that one. Then they had to lock everything down, confessing that it was possible to make changes, little changes, but the effects were so unpredictable that it became the highest level of felony to make an unsupervised trip. Everyone knew what the government was up to. What do people in power always want? More power, for as long as possible. And changing the past is about as much power as it's possible to imagine, so the whole program was distrusted until public demand shut down everything.

I got involved for money. There was a little bit of fame, too, or was it...notoriety. We could argue that we were liberals, we were patriots, and we were God's agents, whatever. The lies we tell ourselves.

It was a lucrative business, but we weren't stupid. There could be no trail, and very precise instructions. No lives could be lost or spared. No wars won or lost. No romances broken or engendered. We were limited to picking the litter off the street, figuratively speaking. Rescuing a book destined for a bonfire. Photographing early biblical scripts. Watching and recording the great men and women of history. Every time, a small thing. Don't make any mistakes. Not one.

The request itself was unusual, even trivial. I didn't understand it, but I knew deep down I should have said no. Changing the popular music charts for one week didn't seem like a lot, but it was published. Records would be changed. Lives impacted. How much? It seemed risky. The proposition was to change the sales data for a record released in February 1981 just by a few hundred units. It would be enough to

switch chart positions – just one place, apparently. I didn't see what the big deal was. Who cared, anyway? Selling music commercially might be a felony now, but it wasn't back then. It was a business.

I know you don't know what a record is. I owned one. But I can't show it to you. Not anymore.

I didn't like it but the money was fantastic. And I was assured it was for the betterment of music history. The band concerned had been stigmatized by failing to climb to the number one position, coming second to, of all things, a novelty act. A witless, pointless and dreary parody of an outdated cultural cliché. Or so I was told. For three whole weeks, the plangent majestic and sweeping visions of a song called "Vienna" was mocked and ashamed by an Australian comedian called Joe Dolce. It was unacceptable, a historic travesty. Justice must be done. And here's a big check.

Making the change itself was easy. I did a little research and found the office where they compiled these things back in those days. In retrospect it might have been better to focus on February 14, 1981, when the record had climbed to the number two position behind another legend, John Lennon. But the sales numbers were too wide, and besides, no one had begrudged the ex-Beatle from climbing to the summit. It was the clown who needed to be kicked. So I changed the data for the following week, February 21<sup>st</sup> 1981.

By the way, I know these dates have no meaning to you. I'll get to that later.

My expectation was that nobody would lose out. It was my understanding that novelty records often sold well because they appealed to a wide audience. So Ultravox would have their place in history, and then the comedy act would replace them for two weeks, instead of three. Everyone would be happy.

And that, then, is how I broke the world. I know you don't believe me. You think I'm crazy. They all do.

I didn't know at the time, of course. My payment was conditional on obtaining some additional information. My patron wanted to know how many more number one records Ultravox would make, and how, with their status in history confirmed, they would have the license and financial backing to scale even greater heights. If anyone was crazy, it was probably that guy. The trivialities that obsess some people.

I jumped forward a ways, to September 2009, and visited a local library. Everything should have been in place, careers completed, history assured. I should have paid more attention, checked a few more references first. But I was hungry. I wanted to be paid, of course, but I also had a curious interest in this esoteric event, and how I had done some good for a minor slice of an unimportant subculture. Oh, the naïveté!

I had no trouble locating the music and arts section. It was huge. My hands were trembling a little when I pulled the *Guinness Book of Hit Singles* from the shelf. I flipped to the U's. Under Ultravox, I saw a star next to the entry for Vienna, signifying a number one hit. My mission had been completed. I almost closed the book there and then. Then I noticed something unusual.

I knew from my research that although Vienna had been stalled at the number two position, the band had continued to carve out a successful career, releasing four more studio albums. Yet, according to the book in my hands, they had only released one more single, which had barely scraped the top twenty. That didn't seem possible. I read the biography at the bottom, and raised an eyebrow. Apparently, the band had always been divided between artistic and commercial concerns, and on scoring a number one, lead singer James Ure elected to pursue a solo career, achieving moderate success, while the rest of the band fell apart. I felt sick.

I turned to the D's, and looked for Joe Dolce. He was nowhere to be seen. I could feel panic clamping my arms and legs like weights.

I looked for John Lennon. Nothing. Not one entry. What had I done?

You see, I understand it completely now, as I began to understand in the library, turning around, and seeing the unfamiliarity, the art, the symbolism. Time is not a straight line. It is a sea. Ripples don't just fan in one direction, they radiate. Human beings have been on this earth for less than 100,000 years. A speck of time in the history of a planet estimated to be at least four and a half billion years old. We are nothing. How far can ripples go? Further than we can imagine. Or remember.

I half staggered to the information desk. I had killed John Lennon, somehow. I waved at the man like an idiot.

"John Lennon, John Lennon!"

"Who?"

"What do you mean, who? John Lennon. The Beatles."

"What beetles? What are you talking about?"

"Oh, come on. For God's sake, the *Beatles*. The band. "Penny Lane", "Strawberry Fields". You know."

I was shouting now, but I didn't care. The man stood up, and clasped his toga around him as he looked over my shoulder, anxiously.

"They said they were bigger than Jesus!" I exclaimed.

The man looked at me with abject pity, but his reply was stern, and authoritative. "And just who, might I ask, is *Jesus*?"

I know you think I'm crazy. I don't care. I'm a murderer. You can put that down on the form I know you're filling out while you slowly nod your head and smile at me. When you execute me, you can write it above my head.

I am the man who killed Jesus Christ.