



Simon Albury

Profile by Andrew Billen

The unquiet campaigner

Retiring RTS chief **Simon Albury** will remain devoted to quality, equality and all that jazz, says **Andrew Billen**

Before we meet, Simon Albury sends by special delivery a big envelope stuffed, effectively, with his life. It reminds me of those Jackdaw folders schoolchildren had in the 1970s, the ones that contained facsimiles, maps, photographs and illustrations in an attempt to bring alive a historical period.

Albury's Jackdaw folder contains: DVDs of two of his documentaries, one about the Lenons, another a *World in Action* on the 1979 winter of discontent; a DVD of a plot-lite 1983 Granada musical drama, *The Starlight Ballroom*; a photo of his tie collection; a pamphlet of performance poetry from his friend Allen Ginsberg; his (Albury's) Myers-Briggs personality profile; and links to videos of "some relatively obscure black performers at the peak of their powers" he brought to the screen.

There is much more, quite clearly, to him than the bonhomous, bearded networker who glad-hands guests at Royal Television Society functions, and who will now do so no longer.

This autumn, after 12 years as its chief executive, Simon Albury is retiring. It will be a blow to many, among them Dorothy Byrne, head of news and current affairs at Channel 4. She tells me her heart often sinks at TV functions, so full of men almost impossible to tell apart. "And then I hear a loud laugh and a flash of bright red glasses and I know I shall have fun after all."

The red glasses, accessorised by braces, spotty tie and ursine laugh, are all, fortunately, still in place when I interview Albury at the RTS in his modest office enlivened by one Lichtenstein print.

Where to start, you might ask? This, after all, is a suit who in the 1970s moonlighted as a black American gospel music DJ on Capital Radio under the name Sam Scott.

But, actually, from the Jackdaw one set of documents has risen above all the others. These record his two years as director of the Campaign for Quality Television.

It was set up in 1989 in response to the Conservative Government's plans to sell off ITV regional franchises by auction. Thanks to

careful, non-belligerent lobbying, the support of stars such as John Cleese and George Harrison, and Albury's charm – deployed most famously during a pivotal dinner with David Mellor at L'Amico in Westminster – the campaign persuaded ministers to insert an "exceptional circumstances" clause into the act.

This meant franchises need not invariably go to the highest bidder. The exceptional exemption was never invoked. It was not, for instance, how Meridian, at which Albury was a founder director, won its contract.

But Albury thinks it had a deterrent effect: applicants dared not enter dull programme prospectuses lest they were gazumped by a rival with higher ambitions. And so, you might expect Albury to argue, British TV was saved from the free market.

"I don't know if you saw the Campaign for Quality Television tape that got sent?" Albury asks me. I did: John Cleese was particularly persuasive. "Well, it was uncomfortable watching when I saw it again after many, many years because we're now in that free market. And in this free market, which is less regulated, ITV is piling money into drama. The things we feared have not happened."

Why not?

"I'm confused to be quite honest. Was this glorious campaign – which was the turning point in my life, the high point of my life, which everyone thought was very important – actually, in hindsight, irrelevant? Would everything have been wonderful? I don't know. It's a question really for someone cleverer than me."

A cynic might even say that 20 years ago Albury was striving to preserve a broadcasting ecology that had been very kind to him. He admits his programme-making career allowed him to pursue his own interests.

He put jazz, his great passion, on Granada at lunchtimes. "So self-indulgent!" he marvels. "*The Starlight Ballroom* gave me the opportunity to show I was a great light drama producer – and to discover I didn't have what it takes," he says self-laceratingly.

He made a "fantastic" gospel show: "But was it fantastic and who was it fantastic for?"



Simon Albury
CEO, RTS

**Was this glorious
campaign... the turning
point in my life... actually,
in hindsight, irrelevant?**

 Dorothy Byrne
Channel 4

I hear a loud laugh and a flash of bright red glasses and I know I shall have fun after all

Clockwise from top left: Allen Ginsberg and Peter Orlovsky in Tomkins Square Park; Simon Albury in the 1960s; Cartoon of Simon Albury at Meridian Broadcasting by Michel Laake, 1999; Gospel singer Marion Williams in the 1980 Granada show, *In the Spirit*; and Screen grab from the 1969 documentary, *John and Yoko in London*, with an outraged Gloria Emerson

Granada/BBC/Michel Laake

Even the *World in Action* on the dock strike allowed him to explore his interest in the mechanics of journalistic inquiry.

Only *John and Yoko in London*, a remarkable 30-minute film for the BBC's *24 Hours*, directed by Paul Morrison, stirs in him the faintest embers of self congratulation. It had been his idea to disturb the Lennon love-in by bringing in an American reporter called Gloria Emerson to challenge them. Challenge them she did, departing on the memorable line, "Mrs Lennon, we are beginning to bore each other."

A few years ago he happened to see Yoko Ono on television plugging a film she had just made about Lennon, and was delighted to see the clip she used was that sequence with Emerson. "That's the reason I'm convinced it was the high point in my career, nine months into my career," he says.

If only he had spotted at that moment that his talent was as an impresario!

Impresario sounds the right word for Albury but does not quite flag up his skills as a crisis manager. When the RTS managed to give an award to the wrong programme last year, he finessed things so well that even Channel 4, whose gong had been misassigned, thanked him.

But he looks more like an impresario than a manager. "I'm a cheerful person," he says. "I'm a loud person. I'm a fun person. I'm a warm person. That's what I am. And there are people like that, and it helps them do jobs they couldn't otherwise do, which is persuade people and energise people."

He believes he was born extrovert (actually, according to the Myers-Briggs commissioned by the RTS, his personality exhibits "Extroverted Intuition with Feeling").

The elder of two sons of a frustrated Birmingham jeweller and his wife, he flourished as a boarder at Clifton College in Bristol, where he was placed in a Jewish house noisy with argument, music and theatre.

Later he studied sociology at Nottingham and Sussex, although his most formative period appears to have been during a scholarship in Brandeis University in Massa- ▶ 34

The Billen profile: Simon Albury

 **Simon Albury**
CEO, RTS

At 24 Hours I had a bottle of Kaolin and Morph in the filing cabinet... I was a very anxious person



Simon Albury at a glance

Married: Phillida, psychotherapist. One son, David

Interests: Human rights, mental health, eclectic music

Education: Boards at Clifton College, Bristol; University of Nottingham; Brandeis University; Sussex University.

1944: Born to jeweller and his wife in Birmingham. Elder of two sons.

1967: Government Social Survey

1969: Granada TV's *World in Action*

1969: Leaves for the BBC: works on *24 Hours* and *Man Alive*, produces films on John Lennon, Andy Warhol and David Hockney

1974: Rejoins Granada: *World in Action*, *What the Papers Say*, *The Outrageous Millie Jackson*, *End of Empire*

1973-76: Britain's first black-American gospel-music DJ on Capital Radio, London, under the name Sam Scott

1989: Heads the Campaign for Quality Television. Successfully campaigns to alter the Conservatives' broadcasting legislation requiring ITV franchises to be awarded to the highest bidder

1991: Director of public affairs, MAI/UN&M television companies

2000: joins the RTS as chief executive

33 ▶ chusetts, when he became close friends with two 1960s icons.

One was the beat poet Allen Ginsberg, "a great inspiration, as a writer, as a performer, and as an activist". The other was the former CIA operative, Miles Copeland: "Miles had done terrible things – done coups in Lebanon – but he'd also played in jazz bands and he was a great, gregarious character."

Upon entering television via BBC current affairs and Granada, Albury, however, made one mistake. He had chosen workplaces dominated by exceptional talents such as Paul Greengrass and Andy Harries.

I hadn't been. I have always worked instinctively and to be in touch with my emotions is a wonderful gift. Tears are a signifier that something's important."

He has lived with his wife, Phillida, since 1976 when he had returned from six weeks' leave in Los Angeles, where he had gone to study political campaigning. She had been renting his flat in West Hampstead. "And she never moved out."

His family, he said, although conservative politically were liberal socially, and welcomed a black African into their Jewish fold.

They married 13 years later. A nurse when



Simon Albury as musical impresario

"I didn't appear to be a fearful person, but I had terrible anxiety. At *24 Hours* I had a bottle of kaolin and morphine in the filing cabinet. I'd have to plug it because I was in such a terrible state. So I was a very anxious person.

"People don't talk about nervous breakdowns anymore. I don't know what replaces them, but I came to a point where I thought I was immobile. I was asked to make a *World in Action*, which I did, called *Armchair Inferno*, which wasn't bad. It was about the dangers of furniture catching fire."

He still does not know how he made the film. "There was something that happened, which was not to do with my working life, that triggered it, triggered this breakdown. I don't want to go into what that was. But I then went into therapy. I went into therapy twice, and the end of the therapy coincided with me doing the gospel show for Granada."

It must have been like emerging from a dark tunnel? "Well, what was the thing I would have most wished to have done? I was doing it! Gospel music! I had come from a fearful place, thinking I couldn't do anything and I was moving from powerlessness to agency.

"I used to think of myself as an average producer on above-average programmes. Now, I now think I was a slightly above-average producer working with incredible producers. But back then I felt everything was potentially catastrophic. If I messed up a show, it would be a catastrophe.

"It was, of course, a terrible burden. I was crazy. And at the end of the process of therapy, I was less crazy and very liberated and in touch with my emotions which, in a way,

they met, she is now a psychotherapist, having been impressed by what therapy did for her husband. They have a son, David, 23, who is embarking on a career in musical theatre, but wants to establish himself as a singer-songwriter and actor. In talking about him, Simon uses the word *Nachas*, a Yiddish term that seems to combine pride, joy and warmth.

He would not these days call himself devout, but he recently attended a Jewish New Year service at a liberal synagogue with his wife. At the end they played some music familiar from his childhood. "I started crying slightly and a woman asked, 'Have you had a recent loss?'"

"I said, 'No, I haven't'. Actually, I should have said I've lost everything, because actually I'm in a period of mourning for the RTS. I have been much more reflective than usual. But yesterday," he says happily, "we had a crisis here and I perked up."

So why on earth is he leaving? He is 69 in February, which he knows is not old compared with very active friends such as the film-maker Roger Graef. He says something about the next CEO of the RTS needing to understand Twitter "viscerally".

But the fact is he knew it was time to go when he noticed he was not looking forward to the Edinburgh Television Festival. A pretty good indicator, we agree.

Once he has left the neutral zone of the RTS he plans to speak out more about television quality. He also wants to see more musicals. He will enjoy doing both, I am sure.

As for the mourning, that will likely go on for a while, but not, perhaps, for as long as it will for the RTS. □