

Churchward Video Notes K – Z

Joseph Churchward,
David Bennewith & Warren Olds

On the weekend of January 20 & 21, 2007 David Bennewith and Warren Olds met in the Wellington suburb of Hataitai to have a conversation with type designer Joseph Churchward (b.1932, Samoa).

The following transcripts are extracts from video footage made over these two days in his basement studio-come-home. Above the din of the television (always on) and the occasional roar of an airplane arriving or departing from Wellington airport we were personally guided through the extensive accumulation of Churchward's alphabets, layout work, proposals, correspondence, contracts and family histories.

These extracts are presented in alphabetical order according to an index of notes made while first watching the footage.

Churchward Video Notes A – J was published in issue #3 of The National Grid.

Last shot, the

#4 15:15



Locations, offices

#1 92:17 IMAGE / TEXT #3 09:50



I started in Courtney Place above McDonalds. Actually, I started off on the other side of the road. I had one room by myself; then when I moved across the street I had a couple of guys working for me, Graeme [Bailey] and Dennis – the blonde fellow.

Do you have any photographs of your old studio?

No.

And is anyone in there now?

I don't know. I then shifted again to a place next door, that was a massive building, it had 3 floors. This was when my son Joe [Jr.] came to work with me.

You worked quite a lot with Joe Jr.?

Yeah, he left just before I collapsed [went out of business]. He went to Australia and my other son, Paul, also went to Australia.

So you have another son who is a printer?

Yes, Paul. He now works for a printer in Petone. I think it used to be the government printer.

Love Music Bad

#1 31:45



Actually, it was my son that wanted to use that typeface. I've forgotten what it's called.

For the Telecom 'Love Music Bad' campaign? [Churchward Serif]

They paid me 1,000 dollars to use it. *They just used it for headlines didn't they? I remember I was driving to work one day and saw it on a billboard and thought 'That's a nice New Zealand-ish typeface', later I found out it was one of your designs. Did you draw this up or just give them the letters?*

They just made it up from my lettering. They paid me 1,000 dollars for the rights – it's only 3 words. I thought that was good.

Do you think there is a complete digital version of this alphabet that exists? They probably got it from my son. Did they say why they chose this typeface? Because it was from New Zealand? Or has [formal] references to New Zealand?

Because it was Saatchi and Saatchi that handled the advertising; it was my son that requested it. First of all they offered me 500 dollars. I said 'No, it's worth 1,000'.

That's fair enough.

Making babies

#1 38:10 IMAGE / TEXT #1 12:35



Do you see your fonts as your babies?
I don't know.

I saw a talk once by some Japanese designers who design characters for cartoons [Devil Robots]. They described those characters as being like their children, that they make and send out into the world with a 'personality'.

Part of my designing comes from my Chinese side. I'm proud of all my bloods. I don't know which part of me is English... well, my eyes are Chinese...

Why do you say that part of your designing comes from your Chinese side?

Because every so often – when I get tired or fed up – I can feel something pushing me to go ahead and I think it is my Chinese side.

So, that's about work ethic?

My working ability and also my artistic side.

Some people would say they invented writing – the Chinese – before the Romans.

They invented many things. I had a barber who was a Jewish fellow and also part Maori. I was there one morning and he said 'Joe, I'm a proud Chinese' and I said 'How come? You're Jewish', he said 'I think we all might go back to one race'.

Making typefaces, learning

#2 03:59 IMAGE / TEXT #2 31:35



What do you think the best way is to learn how to make typefaces? Is it best if you are taught by someone? Or should you teach yourself? Does it just take practice?

Practice makes perfection. It's all from my head. You have your own way – if you become an expert you have your own way of doing things.

A friend told me that to become an expert in something you have to work 3 hours a day for 10 years on it – and that's the definition of an expert. You've probably

clocked that a few times.

When I was at Charles Haines it was 7 days and 7 nights a week – somebody had to do the hand-lettering. That's how I learned. When I became an expert they were all jealous! They said 'Who the bloody hell do you think you are!' and the bosses were saying 'He's the expert'. That felt good. I was so keen. 7 days and 7 nights a week was good overtime too.

Maori alphabet, form

#1 116:20 IMAGE / TEXT #1 7:20



Are the forms in these letters influenced from the Maori designs you grew up with? I probably learned them from my cousins.

Maori alphabet, Saatchi and Saatchi

#3 48:22 IMAGE / TEXT #1 06:30



Before I left [from Samoa] I did a lot of work for Saatchi and Saatchi – it was [Len] Cheeseman, he was the production manager. I got brassed off with them. I did my last Maori alphabets for them. I did some roughs – they wanted to use it for the All Blacks and Tourism. But in the meantime, before I finished my work, they lost the contract for the tourism [a small government scandal]. I got fed up with it and took my designs and made them into finished art myself; these became my two Maori Alphabets 'Maori' & 'Ta Tiki'.

[...]

You know Cheeseman used to ride a push-bike to work. And in the middle of his office he parked this push-bike. I said 'Why do you have a push-bike in your office?' and he says 'It's the only safe place for my push-bike'. That was the end. When I walked out I never got anymore work.

Meadowfresh

#2 04:39 IMAGE / TEXT #2 02:45



This one I did for an advertising agency. I decided to call it 'fasscript' when I sent it to them. I make up all these funny names.

Ah, you took off the 't' in 'fast'.

They just sent me a few letters to make up the alphabet.

Meeting Tua

#1 60:08 IMAGE / TEXT #2 51:00



I always used to catch the train from Naenae to go to Charles Haines; that's how I met my wife. When I walked to the railway station she used to walk on the other side of the road – she was a nurse. She wasn't living very far away from us; she would walk on the other side of the road and she stuck her nose up in the air. I couldn't care less then. Then all of a sudden I got involved with her! Just like that. I don't know who did the slaughtering – her or me.

Things happen quite quickly in your world don't they?

It's life aye...

Naming typefaces

#1 60:19



This is a book from Berthold. There's the first one [typeface] I made. It's an honour to be in a book like this. You see, they are proud of the name 'Churchward'. [...] [pointing at typefaces] Tua is my wife... Marcia is another daughter... and there's fat Marianna.

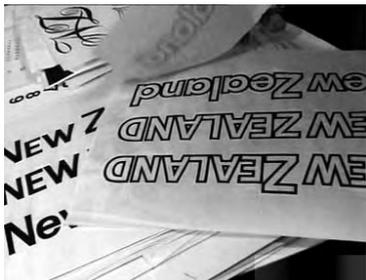
NATIONAL, NATIONAL

#3 103:45



New Zealand, pride

#1 113:47



I can't help being proud of New Zealand. New Zealand's done a lot for me.

Obituary, mother

#3 123:29



Here's the obituary of my mother.

Did you typeset it?

My brother and sister-in-laws said I had no right to do such a writing. I did the whole thing myself. I think my mother deserved it.

You wrote it too?

I wrote it. But I got a typesetter to set it for me in Samoa.

On religion

#1 76:30



You wouldn't call yourself religious?

I'll be honest with you, I don't believe in it. This Jewish fellow, although he is a Jew, he says he doesn't believe in it either. He said 'The Jews made it up to make peace'.

That's what he said?

And then I heard Jesus ran away from his wife and two kids in France and that he's buried in India. I think it is all made up to make peace. Also, there have been more deaths to do with religion than in wars.

Other type designers

#2 69:46



I used to admire other type designers but I've forgotten all their names.

Helvetica – that was my favourite – I used to use it for everything, but from there I started to develop my own Helvetica. Helvetica and Times Roman – they were my favourites.

How is your version of Helvetica different? Were you trying to improve it?

Well, I change the letters slightly so they look like myself. You don't have to do much to change it.

Photocopier

#2 00:04 IMAGE / TEXT #1 40:40



When did you get your photocopier?

I've had one all the time – since I started business. I keep swapping, this is the fourth one I've bought. I use it for everything.

Photocopier, hiding place

#2 12:01 IMAGE / TEXT #2 43:15



I had a cook [in Samoa]. I had a house-keeper and a bird, but they were all robbers... well not robbers... they played tricks on me. I discovered someone was pinching money from my drawers. It's not this photocopier – I had another machine at the time – I opened it up and hid all my money inside. There it was safe. They never knew how to get into it. They play tricks, I gotta play tricks too.

Real mother

#1 06:38 IMAGE / TEXT #2 53:30



I had no parents. I met my poor mother when I was 17. When I left Samoa for New Zealand one of my uncles ran to my grandmother and gave her some money; I had a feeling it was from my mother. My mother was only 17 when she had me, and my father was 24. But I discovered (being nosey into history) that my step-mother was my cousin, my mother was my cousin and my step-father was my cousin. Because the 6th wife of my Scottish great-grandfather's first cousin was my grandfather's mother – they were Tongans. One cousin was the 6th wife of my Scottish side and the other cousin was a Churchward.

Real mother pt. 2

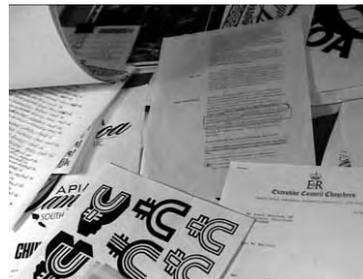
#1 06:00 IMAGE / TEXT #3 63:30



I only stayed with my mum for 2 weeks all my life. I never knew her. One day, when I was at primary school in Samoa, I noticed a beautiful woman peddling on a bike. She stopped where I was picking up rubbish with my class, and she comes up to me and said 'What's your name?' I said 'Joseph', she said 'What is your surname?' I said 'Churchward'. She cried and hugged me and kissed me. When I went back to our classroom all the girls were laughing and said 'What a beautiful girlfriend you've got Joseph' [laughs]. I discovered later on it was my real mum. She had come over to enrol her kids. Later that day, I went to my grandmother and I told her that this beautiful woman came up to me and kissed me and cried. My grandmother laughed and didn't say anything – she didn't want to reveal it was my mother. They [grand-parents] were supposed to be my parents; they brought me up as if I was my father's brother. It's all crooked aye? *It's confusing.* It's life I suppose. And that's a reason why I wanted to become an artist, I am by myself all the time.

Reasons

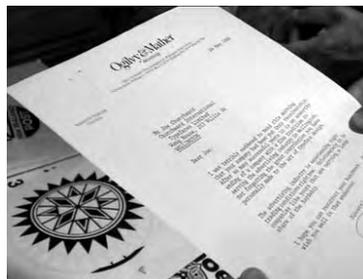
#1 14:42



There were only about 6 [variations on the alphabet] when I went to school. *Is that a reason why you started to design letters? That you thought there weren't enough alphabets?* No, no. It's just a thought that I have as I go on. But I never thought of that.

Receivership, letter

#1 98:20



This letter is from Ogilvy and Mather. 'Dear Joseph, I was terribly saddened to read this morning that your company had been put into receivership. For so many successful years it is unworthy of a company with a fine tradition in serving the advertising community in Wellington. Not forgetting the contribution you've made to the art of typeface design. The advertising industry is experiencing tight trading conditions right now, unfortunately, it is companies like yours that are carrying a large share of the hardship. I hope you can resurrect your business and I wish you well in that endeavour. Martin Turner ... 1988' They were very good to me, advertising agencies. Many of the bosses and owners of the advertising agencies also started off at Charles Haines. *Right.* And that's one reason why I was popular with them.

Reclusive

#4 01:53 IMAGE / TEXT #3 81:15



No, to be honest, I don't mix much. I hide.

You hide and work?

Mainly because I don't like to mix, and I'm no good at talking.

I don't know – you've done pretty well so far.

I run out of ideas of what to talk about – that's what I meant.

Don't we all? There's only so much you can say isn't there.

I was always a private person. I've got my TV, I've got my telephone, what more do I want? But programmes on TV are no good anymore.

I was going to ask you what your favourite TV programme is?

Wrestling. But even the wrestling has gone out the window – spectators can just rush into the ring and bash up the opposition.

Yeah, it's more like acting now.

It's terrible, but I still watch it – it's better than some of the programmes on TV One.

You don't listen to the radio?

Oh yeah, but I only listen to the Samoan radio.

Regular clients

#1 79:00



Did you have regular clients in Samoa?

Yes. The supermarket and the government. I put on all my business cards 'Government Work Most Welcome'.

Religion, royalty, government

#3 94:56 IMAGE / TEXT #2 44:30



I had a flat in a church [Samoa, 1995].

Did you go to church as well?

No, I was just living there. As I was saying, I would be in my room and half-a-dozen girls would come up, a few minutes later a Reverend would knock on my door and say 'Joe, have you got a spare girl for me? Can I use one of your rooms?'. I knew then that they were all crooked. But they are only human beings. That's what I've got against churches. I'm dead against that – not permitting them to have women. That's what we are here for – to multiply. *What about things like government and politics?*

Government is bullying, it's the same as royalty. The richest wanting to bully the rest. Originally we are all equal. The poor cow has been a slave to us all their lives: the cream, the butter... it's nice to eat... but when you look at it...

That's a big New Zealand industry though, isn't it?

Look at the sheep – we take everything from it. What about the poor sheep? *In India the cow is sacred. Do you mean that they give so much to us – the animals?*

Yes, animals give us a lot – not only food but protection. Why don't we grow our own wool?

Well, maybe we will one day.

I notice a lot of people from the old days are very hairy. We'll all go back to being monkeys.

Robert Louis Stevenson

#2 42:24 IMAGE / TEXT #1 16:35



My latest thought... I thought I might write to the government in Samoa. I'd like to go back and go and live in Robert Louis Stevenson's house, and display all my typefaces on the wall and do my typefaces there until I die. And I want to be buried next to Robert Louis Stevenson.

Samoa, lettering

#1 47:28 IMAGE / TEXT #1 16:28



If you stayed in Samoa, do you think that you would have still done lettering?

Yes, and I was still designing when I went back there.

Samoa alphabet

#1 36:37 IMAGE / TEXT #1 63:59



This is where I began the Samoan alphabet. I did this design when I was in Samoa, then when I came back to New Zealand I made a whole alphabet out of it. That's the Samoan alphabet, look, it ends with TV!

Second chance

#1 95:28



Berthold had sent me 8 rejects [typefaces] and at the same time I heard about a type design competition in America. I sent the whole 8 and I received a 3rd prize and 7 other mentions! When Berthold heard about it they went berserk! They said I had no right to enter myself in the competition.

Signature, Churchward typefaces

#1 59:56



The only thing that's important to me if I start selling [my typefaces] is to keep 'Churchward' on the name.

As your signature? It's really funny when you look through the old type catalogues, you are one of the few people that uses his name in the name of the font. It's interesting, considering what we were talking about before – about having your name on those proposals...

Signature, on work

#2 74:43 IMAGE / TEXT #1 29:10



Is there a reason why you often put your signature on your design work?

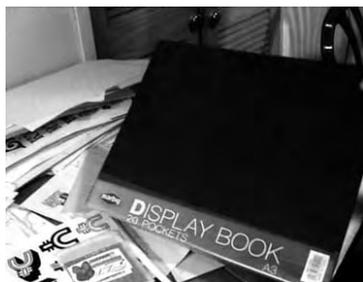
I've been doing it for many years. It belongs to me.

So, if someone commissions you to do a job, or work, do you still see it as belonging to you?

No, no. But – you know – back in the old days the signwriters always put their name on their artwork. I guess it is a little bit of advertising for myself.

Starting again, work

#1 62:18



I was going to start again. So I rang my friend who owns an advertising agency and said 'I'm getting a book [portfolio] ready, how about some work?' He said 'Oh Joe, you're of retired age now, stop worrying about starting up a business'. *But you can't stop working though.* Well, it's better than nothing.

Steve Zafrana, Bluhead Fonts

#3 75:23 IMAGE / TEXT #1 46:39



I rang John Collins from MyFonts and asked if he knew any typeface makers. He gave me three names. The other two said they were too busy, but Steve accepted immediately.

I think it is a really good thing that you can now buy a few of your typefaces. Because, before, it was impossible if you wanted to use them within a digital format. Which is the way most people – or – the way we are used to using them now. It's good to know that they can continue living.

The rules today are funny. I'm not quite sure what goes on. Steve in America now says that if we break up that the

fonts all belong to him. He says he owns the master. Now that's not on, but, on the other hand I signed up with so many Germans and I never got anything back – they all seem to hold onto them.

So, you gave the companies a lot of your drawings to make these typefaces useable, and they never sent the original drawings back to you?

Yes.

And they never buy the whole font from you outright? They just ask for the drawings and give you a percentage of the sales?

MyFonts is 50% and then I split it up with Steve, 50% each – that's my agreement.

Style and quality

#2 29:10



It's all part of my personality I suppose. Everything I do looks similar. Whether it's good or bad I don't know. It's my style.

I think that once you start looking at them all together you can see the relationships between them.

It's my way; the others have their own way. Just lately I've seen some horrible stuff on TV – on headings. They are no longer perfect. It seems like any Tom, Dick and Harry is doing them. I can see that they have been done by people that aren't experienced. It is like they are losing interest and the quality is dropping down. When I first started and it wasn't good enough, they would just reject it immediately.

Suggestions

#3 107:47 IMAGE / TEXT #1 15:25



So these works are not commissioned works are they?

A lot of my stuff is suggestions – I call them suggestions. I send it to them and never hear from them again. I heard Air New Zealand was going to change their identity; I sent them a whole lot of stuff...

Suggestions, All Blacks

#1 106:15



I sent this to the All Blacks. I suggested they make the numbers bigger on the jerseys because they were only small. I also suggested using my Maori alphabet for the numbers – and they sent it back. But I noticed they have since enlarged the numbers.

Was this recently?

It's from 1988.

Suggestions, Atypi

#1 68:49



I did this for Atypi [Association Typographique Internationale] and I sent it to them. Never heard back. I was a member – so I left.

Suggestions, Lotto

#1 75:45



I've got a feeling this is close to what they are using now... they are using it but they never contacted me. Certain things I notice, when they use it without my permission.

Suggestions, National Party

#3 100:34 IMAGE / TEXT #3 88:20



Those ones down there, did you send them to the National Party?

Yeah, once again I didn't hear from them. *Because you did suggestions for the Labour party as well? [uncovering stuff] – oh, wow, another typeface. I did them for the last election.*

Suggestions, Paul Holmes

#3 91:12



I sent these to Paul Holmes... Paul Holmes... who is he?

He's the guy on TV. He did the Holmes' show.

Ah yes. He's gone to another TV station. Prime.

I don't know if he's still there though.

So, were these ideas for a flag? You know how there was that discussion about redesigning the New Zealand flag?

Yeah, I sent these but I heard nothing back from him.

I wondered what happened to that discussion? I think there was a Wellington guy that was funding some aspect of it.

Suggestions, Qantas

#3 87:23



Look at this... a Qantas logo with a Churchward 'Maori head' on the top of it. I did a big proposal... but I cut it all up. Once again they were all suggestions. I never heard back from them. Was this a takeover suggestion? [...]

Suggestions, Te Papa museum; Marae TV programme

#1 67:26



I did this for Te Papa and I sent it to them. Once again I never heard anything more. There's a programme on TV called Marae and I didn't like the design so I redesigned it and sent it to them... never heard anymore. [...] Here are some more Te Papa suggestions. I told them I didn't like their present symbol. *The thumbprint?* I told them it looks like a prisoner. Perhaps they didn't like my comments.

Suggestions, TV2

#1 107:46



Again, this was a suggestion [for TV2]. *How long would something like this take?* Ages. But when you believe in something you don't care how long it takes. When I was a bit younger I was fast too. Look at these colours – jumping up! *The colours you use are really bright.* Yes. *And did you get any feedback about these?* I don't think I sent them in. But, looking at them, they would look beautiful on TV.

Are these from a while ago?

Yes, I think when I came back from Samoa [1995].

[...]

I've done a lot and they take no notice of it – [flipping through] that's a good one. Actually, I notice now the background would look better black. It would jump up if it was all black. This was when I was good at colour. I've lost interest in colour.

Why is that?

I don't know... time and age I suppose.

Television

#3 42:07 IMAGE / TEXT #1 68:30



Do you always work with the TV on?

Because some people don't like TV.

Now and again I hear something I'm interested in that I concentrate on, but all the time I'm flat out working.

The Gang

#1 74:56



There's the gang [at Charles Haines]. To be honest he [pointing] is the only one that is living. They are all dead. This fellow here was a religious fellow and he ended up working for me. He was very religious, and every so often I'd find him underneath his table fast asleep. The girls used to moan like hell – his name was Eric Williams – I said 'Leave him alone, he needs his sleep'. Either that or he was saying his prayers.

Typeface, most proud of

#2 11:57 IMAGE / TEXT #1 43:40



Do you have a typeface of yours that you are most proud of? Do you have a favourite?

I've gone beyond that, there's so many of them.

Typefaces, way they are used

#1 71:31 IMAGE / TEXT #2 22:00



Do you mind how your typefaces are used?

No, I don't mind. I've done my part.

You are happy if they are just being used?

Yes, that's the main thing; that's why I do it – to use. I would love it if everyone used them. I made them for human beings.

Weights

#2 18:51



How do you know if that's the right weight for a 'light'?

I got to a stage where I would make the letter exactly 70mm deep and then I got a list of how thick it should be, from light up to boldest. It is my own system. So when I start designing I look at the list and I know exactly how thick to go. Mind you, I originally got it from looking at other alphabets. But the boldest – they didn't have boldest – I went beyond the boldest I found.

Wellington, arriving in

#3 25:40



The minute I arrived here [in Wellington], on the corner of Willis Street and Manner Street, I felt as if I'd been here before. Then I discovered my English great-grandfather spent 6 months here when he applied to be the English consul in Samoa.

Wellington scene, clients, drinks and bonuses

#1 101:44 IMAGE / TEXT #2 34:00



I started business when I got married. On Friday night we did play up. All my friends and I would go to the pub – I'm not a drinker – but I had to drink. When I was in business, on Friday evening I'd buy a lot of booze and we would have a party. The clients would come in too and we'd all enjoy ourselves. At the back of the Embassy theatre there's a shortcut going to where I was living – it was an empty section full of muddy puddles. Some Friday nights I'd wake up, the water on my glasses – I'd collapsed on the way home! Now that same space has a building on it and it's an advertising agency! One time, I met an old English friend of mine. We were waiting for the bus and he asked if he could come to my place to call a taxi. The next minute he was yelling and he was trying to pull me out of a fence! Dropping bombs!

Work hard and play hard aye?

As soon as I lost everything, and there was nothing I could do, I gave up drinking. I was a heavy smoker, always had a cigarette in one hand, I didn't puff all the time, but it was just a habit I had. When I went back to Samoa they were about 12 dollars a carton and then they went up to 15. By the time I came back to New Zealand Helen Clark had raised the prices and they were 80 dollars a carton! So I gave up.

[...]

#2 36:20

The drinks were part of my advertising business – to get me more work. In fact, I played a little trick nobody knew about. Whenever I'd get a cheque from a client, the fellow that would give me the work, I would give him 10 percent of what I received under the counter. I had lots of friends because of this. They used to get embarrassed and say 'What for Joe? That's not fair' I said 'You give me the work and they make a big profit from it – that's your share'.

You had a good relationship with your clients?

I had a lot of friends. I was always buttering. But one English fellow at Woolworths said 'Hey Joe, you are giving me all this money, how about paying my airfare to London and back?' I said 'Get lost!' Then all of a sudden he says 'I heard somebody else is doing that now'. But my payment was regular – not one airfare every five years or something. I think they all did it [the agencies]. It's a little secret. I just wanted to be fair. Later on I played another trick... well it's not a trick... every time I'd get paid by the big companies I'd give my staff a cut and they loved it. 5 percent of the total. *There's not many people who would do that.*

It was a bonus. The only trouble was on a particular date of the month – when they knew I received the cheques – everybody was like 'Hey Joe!'. *So you had a good relationship with your staff?*

Yes, not only would I give them the weekly party, when I'd get the big cheques I'd give them a bonus too.

What do you think about when you are making letters?

#1 112:14



I think of the past, and I think of the future... [whispering] and I think of the girls.

What if you weren't a type designer

#2 66:50

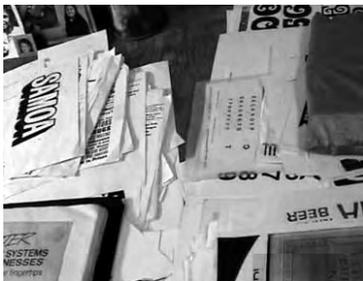


I was wondering – that after your business collapsed – if you thought about doing anything else?

When I was a kid I used to serve in my grandparents' shop. This is my favourite story I tell people when I was serving in the shop. Old Samoan couples would come in – a majority of Samoan couples aren't married – defacto. They would come in and I'd serve them, sometimes they would buy lollies. He would pass it to his partner and say 'This is for you darling'. I was only a little boy and I used to love it! I could see that they weren't married but they were as happy as anything. You know, marriage is forced.

What the hell is life all about anyway?

#3 73:30 IMAGE / TEXT #3 85:53



When was the last time you went back to Samoa?

About a year ago. The last trip the Samoan newspaper and TV shouted my fare. But I don't want to go to Samoa anymore.

Because it's too hot?

I'm ready to go, but not to Samoa. I'm telling my kids I'm trying to grow some wings so I can fly into outer space. Ah, it's life – what the hell is life all about aye?

Don't know, can't answer that one.

Word, false

#2 80:50



Don't forget – typefaces and alphabets are false. A word is false.

How do you mean?

You change the sound 'Blah' into letters and it becomes a written word. But, if you look back purely at the letterforms it is still just 'Blah'.

They are just forms that we are used to? – Letters and numbers are always evolving?

Yes, first they went and added on to the Roman alphabet with Indian numbers, and next...

World, the

#3 100:13 IMAGE / TEXT #1 101:44



But you realise one day the world is just going to collapse and that's the end of all of us? It's only a flying machine – but it's got no motor.

You want credit, me no give

#3 20:53



When I was in Samoa, I'd keep on seeing these notices everywhere. So, when I came back I made one for myself.

These were signs from around Samoa?

They were pasted on the shop windows. 'You want credit, me no give, you get mad, me give credit, you no pay, me get mad, better you get mad'.

