# BACK TO THE FUTURE

**_Ashes To Ashes_ returns for its third and final series next week. Can DI Alex Drake find her way back to the 21st Century?**

**ASHES TO ASHES, FRIDAY WEEK, BBCI**

Well, this is mighty weird. Here I am, alone in the office of DCI Gene Hunt from *Ashes To Ashes*. Perched behind the great man's whisky-stained desk, in fact. There's a prehistoric-looking 80s computer to my right, Gene's heavily perforated dartboard over on the wall to my left and, on top of the teetering pile of paperwork stacked on the shelf behind me, is one of those ancient, portable cassette recorders – not unlike the one I used to hold in front of the radio every Sunday night to record the Top 40.

Or at least I assume these little details are all in place, having spotted them so often on TV. Right now though, I actually can't see a blinking thing in here. With filming over for the morning, Gene and his team – DI Alex Drake, DS Ray Carling, DC Chris Skelton, WPC Shaz Granger and that bulky chap with the enormous whiskers – whose name I've never caught but who forever seems to be hovering in the background – have gone off to lunch, which means the entire set has been temporarily plunged into darkness.

And yet this feels strangely apt. I'm one of a privileged handful of journalists who've been allowed to come to see where this final series of *Ashes To Ashes* is being shot, but keeping us all in the dark seems the day's top priority.

We understand, though. Of course we do. This final series promises ingeniously to tie up all the loose ends, not just from *Ashes To Ashes* but also from its 70s-based predecessor, *Life On Mars*, in which John Simm played time-travelling cop Sam Tyler. ▶

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**Philip Glenister and Keeley Hawes are back as DCI Gene Hunt and DI Alex Drake**







**Far left: Philip Glenister with John Simm in *Life On Mars***
**Left: Keeley Hawes with Rachael Stirling in *Tipping The Velvet***
**and (above) with David Oyelowo, Rupert Penry-Jones, Matthew Macfadyen and Peter Firth in *Spooks***

So, basically, nobody's allowed to tell us anything significant, plot-wise, for fear of ruining the surprise.

Keeley Hawes, whose 21st-Century character Alex has been stuck in the 80s since she was mysteriously transported there in *Ashes*' very first episode, is clearly enjoying keeping us in suspense. "You do know we're not allowed to answer anything!" she teases.

Keeley does, however, promise that viewers are in for something "amazing" and that the scripts are "the best I've ever read".

But come on, can't she at least give us a teensy hint as to where Alex is heading?

"Well, I get back again," Keeley confirms (to the 80s, she means – although I think we already figured out that bit).

"Gene has to slap me around," she adds, referring to the fact that Alex is initially in a coma, "which proves he wants me, he *needs* me. So, yeah, it's a good place to start – a slap around the chops!

"Alex isn't really any clearer about what's actually happening, but there are signs hidden in episode one for people who look for that sort of thing."

And her working relationship with Gene?

"They're still rubbing along…"

Keeley says she's known for some while – since midway through the last series, in fact – how this whole *Mars/Ashes* saga was destined to conclude. "It all sort of falls into place," she assures us.

"In this series we've also got Daniel Mays coming in, playing a significant new character. He completely alters the dynamic."

So has filming these final episodes been emotional? "Incredibly," she says. "Especially after working with people for years."

But she does admit she's enjoyed having more freedom this time from a fashion perspective. "In previous series they've been more controlling on that front, but this time we've been left alone. It's actually very difficult to keep dressing someone around a white leather biker's jacket!"

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> PHILIP GLENISTER

Philip Glenister, who's played Gene Hunt since the start of *Life On Mars* in 2006, tells us to expect the relationship between his character and Keeley's to evolve further. "It has to," he points out. "We've got another eight hours worth of episodes, so you have to move the story on."

And he adds, "It's much darker, this series. The relationships are much more complex. We're finding out who the real Gene Hunt is. There's a lot of angst, a lot of mistrust. I think the audience will question who's good, who's bad. They'll want to keep tuning in to find out what the hell is going on. Is Gene the sum of his parts? Is Alex the sum of hers?"

So have Philip's own memories of the 80s been a big influence on the way he's played the iconic Hunt?

"It was a strange decade for me," he reflects. "I think I preferred the latter part. In the early 80s I was sort of drifting. I didn't really know what I wanted to do. I felt lost. It wasn't until I went to drama school that I felt any sense of purpose. I was listening to a lot of depressingly bad music as well!"

Talking of 80s music, *Ashes* executive producer and co-creator Ashley Pharoah says it'll still play a key part in these last episodes.

"One of the joys of moving on a year," he admits, "is it opened up a whole new load of songs I could play with! They're a very important element."

So, any particular favourites he was determined to include?

"I was delighted to find out *This Charming Man* by The Smiths came out in 1983. That just HAD to be a driving sequence with Alex looking at Gene!"

And which historical reference points can we expect to crop up this time?

"One episode deals with the ANC, and how in 1983 someone like Hunt would have regarded Nelson Mandela as a terrorist. There's also an episode with a fireman who'd been a soldier in the Falklands. And there's a story set on the night Thatcher got back in."

For everyone who's worked on *Ashes To Ashes* and *Life On Mars*, it's clear the impact will be a lasting one.

"It's been a five-year journey on screen," says Ashley. "But overall it's been 13 years, back to when Matthew and I (that's Matthew Graham, his fellow creator) first had the idea.

"To not have it in our lives any more will be very strange."

And for Philip, how much of the blisteringly non-PC Gene Hunt has rubbed off on him?

"Oh, loads, I'd imagine," he chuckles. "I've been very fortunate to play this part – and to have the freedom to play it.

"My biggest fear now is having people tell me, 'you can't say this' or 'you can't do that,' because up until now I've been able to say, 'Sorry, this is set in 1983 – and this is Gene Hunt!'

"Losing that will be kind of frustrating!"

**Mike Ward**



**Shooting from the hip: Philip Glenister admits he'll miss playing the blunt, decidedly un-PC Gene Hunt**

PHOTOGRAPHS: BBC