

Star Trek

Past, Present and Future



by DAVID HOUSTON

It's really not so phenomenal that *Star Trek* is fantastically popular, that its audience is far greater now in reruns than it was on prime-time NBC; and it's hard to see how anyone can be surprised that the show has millions of staunch fans all over the world.

The real phenomenon is that it ever came into existence in the first place.

In the beginning, back in the mid '60s, *Star Trek* had everything working against it. Science fiction had the reputation of being juvenile, low-grade nonsense (due in large part to so many juvenile, low-grade SF movies). Specifically, SF was spurned by the TV moguls who felt morally certain it could never appeal to the mass market of television.

To argue that SF has great potential for expressing ideas and ideals was futile. That only made matters worse, because the powers that were (and largely still are) at the networks aimed to service an audience with an eighth-grade mentality. "None of that intellectual crap for us!"

The history of the making and broadcasting of *Star Trek* is one of courage and frustration, integrity and compromise, delight and disgust.

Astute observers have noticed that the First Season was largely superb, the Second was uneven, and the Third was sometimes actually bad. There are reasons for this. The incurably cynical would say it was inevitable.

Roddenberry said, even before *Star Trek* left the drawing boards: "The television writer-producer faces an almost impossible task when he attempts to create and produce a quality TV series. Assuming he conceived of a program of such meaning and importance that it could ultimately change the face of America, he probably could not get it on the air or keep it there!" (From *The Making of Star Trek*, by Stephen E. Whitfield and Gene Roddenberry)

His words turned out to be prophetic.

In 1960, Roddenberry formulated the idea of a show about a "wagon train to the stars," a starship with a mission to "explore strange new

worlds, to seek out new life and new civilizations, to boldly go where no man has gone before." Even back then, as a working title, he was calling the idea *Star Trek*.

Over the next five years, he developed and refined the concept until, when he felt the time was right, he approached Desilu Studios with the idea, proposing that a pilot be prepared. It was a daring thing to suggest, but the time was right for Desilu too: they were faltering financially and needed a splashy idea for a pilot.

It was obvious that a *Star Trek* pilot would be expensive, but Desilu executive Herb Solow liked the idea, and committed his studio to seeing it through.

Out of five story ideas submitted to them, NBC selected the one they liked best, *The Cage*, and indicated a willingness to review a pilot made from it.

The half-million-dollar original budget was exceeded, the pilot was committed to film, and NBC rejected it. They said it was too intellectual, that there wasn't enough action. (*The Cage* was later used as a basis for a two-part story, *The Menagerie*, which won the International Hugo

Below: De Forest Kelley had been type-cast as a villain until Gene Roddenberry spotted him and asked him to read for the role of Dr. Leonard McCoy. Roddenberry even suggested a new hair style for De Forest to complete his new image on *Star Trek* as the witty-wise country doctor.





Award for best SF dramatic presentation of 1966.)

So, somehow, Roddenberry and Desilu found a way to prepare a *second* pilot. It was the first second try in television history.

It wasn't easy to second-guess the network "bankers" who had a life-and-death say over the pilot. What did they mean by "action"? How intellectual is "too intellectual"? How much compromise could the *Star Trek* concept tolerate, before it would degenerate into a worthless space opera (like *Lost in Space*)?

The network wanted Roddenberry to ditch his number one officer (played by Majel Barrett) because the audience, allegedly, would not accept a female second-in-command. That was workable under the format, so Roddenberry complied. But they also wanted him to dump Mr. Spock—because Spock looked like the devil and might offend religionists in the audience (!). This Roddenberry would not do. Finally, they acquiesced and let him keep the alien freak.

(Later, network executives were to clamor for more Spock-oriented stories because the Vulcan proved

unaccountably popular.)

The second pilot, *Where No Man Has Gone Before*, was completed. (It was later aired as a First Season episode.) Although the cost was less than the budget of the first pilot, it far exceeded allowance—further whittling away at Desilu's financial state, further eroding Roddenberry's endurance.

But NBC bought it.

Then the troubles really began—and multiplied as prolifically as tribbles.

Since 1966, television censors have let up a bit; things can be done, said, and shown now that were verboten then. But even back in the Dark Ages of the mid '60s, there could have been no way the script artists could have foreseen and avoided plot-mangling directives like those which were handed down from the Program Practices department at the network:

"... Please try to find some other way for Van Gelder to subdue the Crewman, since a knee in the face would be considered brutal."

"... Please delete the underlined in Janice's speech: 'I'm a damned attractive female.'

Above: In the pilot for *Star Trek* entitled *The Cage*, Leonard Nimoy was cast as science officer Spock. Majel Barrett was the first officer, Number One, and Jeffrey Hunter was Captain Christopher Pike. Later the episode was incorporated into the new *Star Trek* with William Shatner as Captain Kirk. *The Menagerie* dealt with the incidents aboard the Enterprise while Pike was captain and used *The Cage* as the story within the story. Note the changes in the uniforms — pictured are the originals, which used a metallic material and were not as fitted as the later models. Even the phasers went through changes, becoming more compact, looking less like a conventional twentieth century handgun.

"... Since you are portraying hypnotism as a legitimate medical tool, Van Gelder should be hypnotized by *Dr. McCoy* rather than *Mr. Spock*.

"... Keep in mind that portion of the NAB Code which states, 'The use of visual or aural effects which would shock or alarm the viewer... are not permissible.'"

(From *The Making of Star Trek*)

And the *Star Trek* production staff had plenty of problems of their own as well. In a totally invented universe, everything had to be reasoned



Above: The sick bay aboard the U.S.S. Enterprise. The beds, which checked all of the body's functions, were later changed to a more streamlined style, but the displays above the beds remained the same. Although at first the *Star Trek* creators thought they had developed a unique idea, they later learned that several hospitals were already designing their own (simpler) workable diagnostic beds.

Below: Nichelle Nichols began her career as a singer and dancer, touring as a vocalist with Lionel Hampton and Duke Ellington. Nichelle had quite a bit of theater experience, but her first television appearance was in Roddenberry's *The Lieutenant* series. As communications officer Uhura, she brought equal rights for women into space. Uhura was a combination of the sensual, the feminine, the independent, and the highly competent.



out: What would their beds be like? What are the plumbing arrangements on the Enterprise? How about a 23rd-Century fork? A drinking glass? Just how fast *is* warp-six?

While other production teams were polishing ordinary weekly shows in the normal seven eight-hour work days, the *Star Trek* team was at it twelve to fifteen hours a day and still were falling behind schedule.

Always the network and studio people nagged: We want more "planet" shows (the most expensive kind), and you must cut down on your expenditures. Other shows are on schedule; what's wrong with you? and so on, and so on.

Roddenberry took a less active part in the Second Season, partly because so much of his time was taken up fighting political battles in controllers' offices; and he pulled out altogether, stymied and disillusioned, before the Third Season began.

Dorothy Fontana—*Star Trek* writer and script supervisor—was asked on a Los Angeles radio program to name the most unpleasant thing she remembered about *Star Trek*. Without hesitation, she answered: "The third season." She explained that the new producer, while a capable man, just did not understand the nature and importance of a show like *Star Trek*. He was willing to use monster stories and space operas to fill up the necessary air time, never realizing

what *Star Trek* should have been capable of.

That there was a Third Season at all was another minor miracle.

At the end of the Second Season—not as good as the first, but including some utterly beautiful shows—NBC announced that the show would be cancelled.

In his book, *The World of Star Trek*, author David Gerrold (who wrote the episode *The Trouble With Tribbles*) explains in great detail what occurred. Basically: a West Coast *Star Trek* activist turned the SF underground into a revolutionary movement by making it known (before the cancellation was even officially announced) that fans might, just might, be able to influence the network by writing letters. The SF fan-club circuit allowed the activist to reach about 5,000 people. And from them, the word spread rapidly.

NBC received roughly one million letters of protest. And they renewed *Star Trek* for its Third Season.

There are those who claim that there was a conspiracy at NBC, a clique of top planners who simply resented *Star Trek* and wanted to blast it permanently out of the galaxy. The evidence for this conspiracy, they say, lies in the crushing indignity *Star Trek* suffered in its Third Season: *Star Trek* was moved from its 8:30 time slot to the fatal 10:00 position, in which few dramatic shows survived in the 60's.

And neither did *Star Trek*. It was finally axed after the Third Season.

But Roddenberry, a man of generous heart, told us that in a sense NBC knew what it was doing.

"On the basis of numbers," he said, "which is all they had to go on at that time, it was reasonable for them to cancel the show. They did not have demographics then, no qualitative rating system; they didn't know what kind of people the show was reaching, only how many."

He further indicated that there is still a long way for the networks to go in refining their methods of determining audience numbers and importance.

Since *Star Trek* left NBC, Roddenberry has had a go at two other possible series: *Genesis II* and *The Questor Tapes*.

The Questor Tapes, an engrossing, well-made drama about a guardian android, racked up profoundly low

ratings and hasn't been heard from since.

Regarding *Genesis II* (there were two pilots for this opus also; the other was called *Planet Earth*), Roddenberry said it came out when it looked like the *Planet of the Apes* series was going to be a hit. He said he kept getting memos from people saying, "Isn't there some way we can add apes to *Genesis II*?"

Roddenberry sent back a memo saying he had a better idea: a creature that was half-man, half-turtle—to give an underwater dimension to the show. "I suppose I first knew it was all over," he said, "when I realized they were taking the suggestion seriously!" (From an article by Susan Sackett in *TV Showpeople* magazine, June, 1975)

Meanwhile, back on the Enterprise . . .

In the six years since *Star Trek* left the network, it has grown immeasurably in popularity. It is now syndicated on 142 American stations and is being seen in more than 50 foreign countries.

The reruns in Los Angeles are on Channel 13; its program director says: "We get more mail and phone calls on this show than any other show we've ever had on the air. When the program is on the schedule and we preempt it for a special, our switchboard gets so overloaded we can't handle all the calls."

There are more than 100 official *Star Trek* fan clubs across the country. One of them, STAR (the Star Trek Association for Revival) boasts of more than 4,000 members. There's a *Star Trek* fan club on almost every sizeable college campus.

Star Trek Conventions are held several times a year (see page 43) in major cities. Roddenberry attends one major convention a year and addresses fans who number as many as 10,000 in one hotel ballroom.

Then why doesn't *Star Trek* come back? Are the networks *that* blind?

Although it's true that no network has approached Roddenberry to suggest a new *Star Trek* series, Roddenberry says he doubts it would be wise to start again in any case. "The old hour shows seem to have become larger than life, and it's pretty hard to fight a legend. The best way to bring *Star Trek* back on television now would be to do it as several movies-of-the-week each

season. There we would have the time and the budget to make it better than before." (From *TV Showpeople*, June, 1975)

As of now, however, there have been no firm offers for such movies-of-the-week, although Roddenberry still has the idea cooking on several network back-burners.

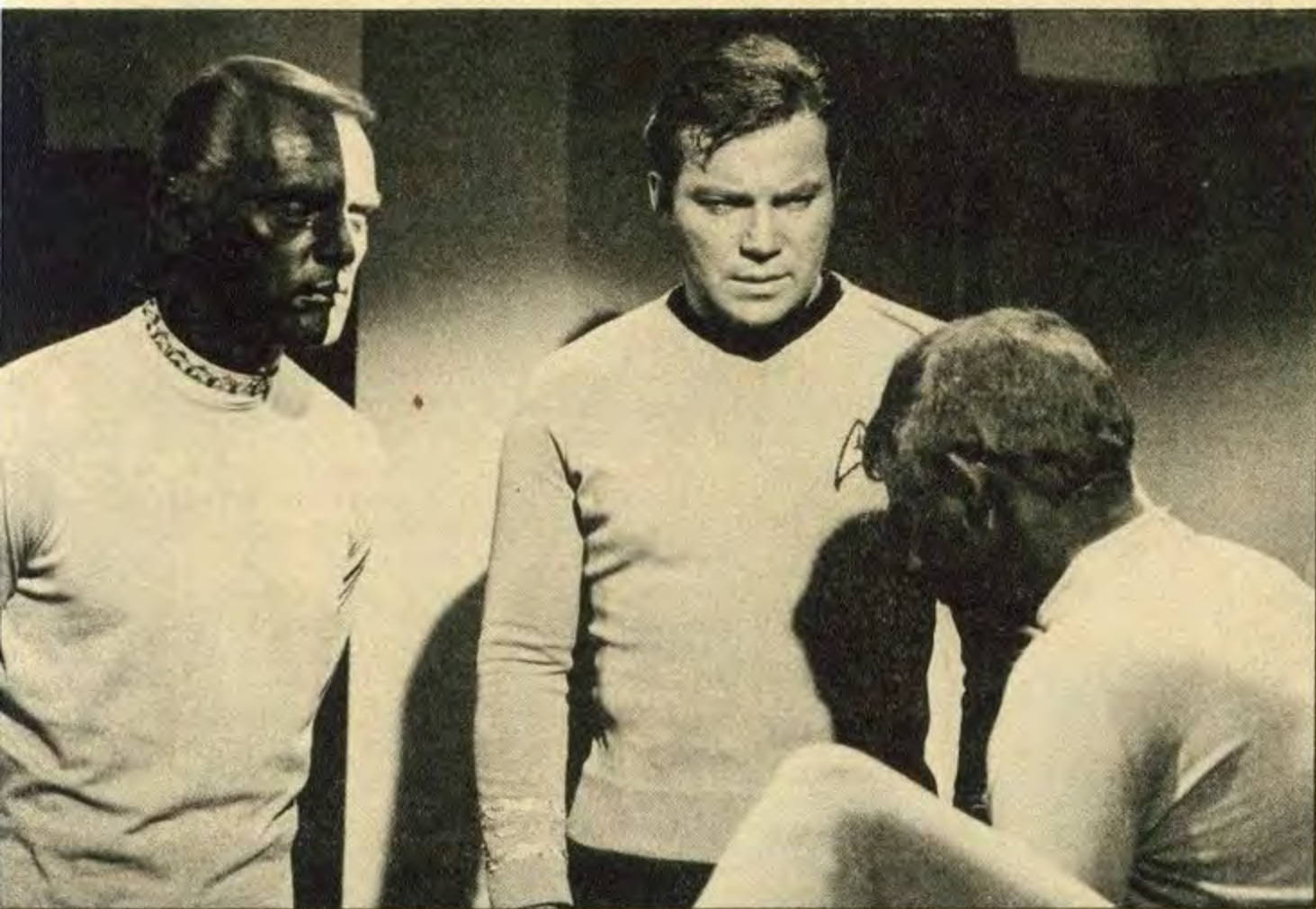
What seems a virtual certainty, though (and if you're a *Star Trek* devotee and haven't heard about this, don't inadvertently damage this magazine as you read on) is a *Star Trek* feature film for theatrical release.

The movie (title undecided) is to be written and produced by Gene Roddenberry—as soon as he finishes

Below: First officer Spock and Captain Kirk. Note the gold braid on their sleeves. In the first season gold braid was used on dress uniforms only, but when the uniforms were redesigned, it was added to the regular uniforms. The Star Fleet emblem was also added to the tunics. Pictured: Spock with his tricorder, and Kirk with a communicator. The tricorder was one of the more useful and diverse tools at their disposal on missions away from the ship. It analyzed elements and tracked life forms, in addition to many other scientific functions.



Left: Although Gene Roddenberry began his writing career doing westerns and police stories, he did a meticulous and miraculous job in creating the world of *Star Trek*. His attention to detail has never been surpassed on any other show. He took into consideration every possible development of the twenty-third century and emphasized believability in all aspects of the production.



Above: In the third season episode, *Let That Be Your Last Battlefield*, Frank Gorshin and Lou Antonio guest-starred as Bele and Lokai. Bele was a law officer who was trying to capture a political dissident and take him back to their home planet for trial. This episode, which aired in 1969, was an indictment against racial prejudice. It was shows such as this one which took *Star Trek* out of the realm of mere fantasy and made it an intriguing and often controversial look at human nature, and at man's future in the universe.



Above: George Takei as Lieutenant Sulu, helmsman, navigator, and weapons officer aboard the Enterprise. George, who was with the show for all three seasons, developed an interest in fencing after filming two *Star Trek* episodes in which he had to learn the sport: *The Naked Time* and *Shore Leave*. As a matter of fact, George got his dream come true when he played a French swordsman during the Renaissance period in *The Naked Time* episode of *ST*.

Below: From the animated *Star Trek* series. (left to right) Mr. Spock, voice by Leonard Nimoy; Captain Kirk, voice by William Shatner; and Dr. McCoy, voice by De Forest Kelley. James Doohan does the voice for Scotty and Nichelle Nichols does the voice of Lt. Uhura. The cartoon is well-done, but as William Shatner commented, it could have been done better by bringing the cast together to do the voices. As it is, Shatner takes a tape recorder along on location shootings for other shows and reads his *Star Trek* cartoon lines into it!



another movie, *Magna I*, a 20th Century Fox production about life under the sea, set in the year 2111.

A number of story outlines have been prepared and are under consideration. One possibility involves the early years — when the Enterprise was first built and launched and the original crew, back at the Space Academy, was first selected. Another concerns an outer-space quest for the nature of God. But as of our press time, no final decision has been made.

Whether or not *all* of the original cast will be available at the time the movie goes into production remains to be seen.

"Assuming Paramount doesn't ask them to do the movie for nothing—which may be very close to their first offer—they'd all very much like to be a part of it," Roddenberry said.

That movie could mean the start of a real *Star Trek* renaissance. Just considering the popularity of the *Planet of the Apes* movies, one *Star Trek* film could beget a whole string of them. Or at least—through being a box-office smash—engender that proposed movie-of-the-week series for television.

Star Trek really can't die. It's one of those workable formats that allows for the telling of diverse stories in an unlimited variety of situations. The Enterprise officers are one of those groups like *The Three Musketeers* — immortal because of their individuality, camaraderie, humanity, and daring.

And those qualities are the stuff of spellbinding drama—past, present, and future. ★