



THE COMPLETE GUIDE TO
**GENE
 RODDENBERRY**

WE REMEMBER THE MAN BEHIND STAR TREK AND THE INSPIRATION FOR GENERATIONS OF FILMMAKERS, WRITERS, ARTISTS AND FANS

WORDS STEVE O'BRIEN

Few TV writers' names are as marquee-friendly as Gene Roddenberry's. In that original *Star Trek* title sequence, his screen credit zooms in before even William Shatner's. In 1985, he became the first ever TV writer to be awarded a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. Ask any keen TV watcher who Gene Roddenberry is and you'll get: "The creator of *Star Trek*."

Yet Roddenberry's relationship with *Star Trek* was a complicated one. He was deeply possessive of the show, but he was also – occasionally – resentful of it. And while Trekkers deified him, Paramount was less smitten, often preferring to keep him as far away from *Star Trek* as they could without alarming the fanbase.

Gene Roddenberry would have loved to have fathered another series that was adored as much as *Star Trek*, but another success always eluded him. Though it wasn't for want of trying. His career is littered with television pilots that never took flight, with books that were never finished, with movies that never lived up to their potential.

So when everything else failed, he found himself, in the twilight of his life, back at the bosom of his most famous creation. However, much as he might have hated it, every

newspaper report, when he died on 24 October 1991, referenced *Star Trek* in its headline.

Reading those obits, it's brain-blowing how much Eugene Wesley Roddenberry packed into his 70 years on this Earth. Writers now, generally speaking, aren't armed with the same real-life credentials as Roddenberry experienced. His wasn't a moneyed, cloistered background, of private schools and Harvard and New Yorker internships. Majoring in police science at Los Angeles City College, Roddenberry joined the United States Army Air Corps when he was 20 and became a pilot for Pan-Am when he was 24, in 1945. Two years later, a plane he was piloting crash landed in the Syrian desert. Roddenberry dragged injured passengers from the burning plane and led the group to get help. In total, 14 people died in the crash.

Roddenberry quit Pan-Am in 1948, itching for a job in which he could flex his creative muscles. But with few writing jobs out there for a one-time pilot with two young kids, he applied for a job with the Los Angeles Police Department. After just over a year in the traffic division, he was transferred to the newspaper unit, where his responsibilities included penning press releases (writing at last!) and speeches for the Chief of Police. It was around this time that Roddenberry had his first professional

brush with television, when his boss assigned him as technical adviser for a new police procedural series titled *Mr District Attorney*. Roddenberry soon proved so invaluable that he started penning scripts for the NBC show, which in turn led to writing gigs on the crime series *Highway Patrol* and on the political drama *I Led Three Lives*. By 1956, struggling to juggle his dual careers of policeman and writer, he resigned from the LAPD.

Roddenberry's first job as a full-time TV scribe was on the long-forgotten anthology show *The West Point Story*, eventually penning a third of the series' overall episodes. There were other shows too, all unremarkable in their own ways – the westerns *Bat Masterson* and *Jefferson Drum*, the seafaring adventure show *Harbormaster*, the crime drama *Highway Patrol*. All the time though, Roddenberry was beavering away on his own series pitches. Some made it to pilot – *The Wild Blue*, *Police Story*, *333 Montgomery* (starring DeForest Kelley as a Perry Mason-styled big city lawyer), others never even got that far.

He finally hit upon a pitch that CBS wanted with *The Lieutenant* in 1963 (see box-out). It was on this show that he made many of the professional connections that would continue into his next created series, from producer Gene L. Coon and casting director Joe D'Agosta to actors Gary Lockwood, Leonard

Nimoy, Walter Koenig, Nichelle Nichols and Majel Barrett.

The Lieutenant had benefited from having the US Department of Defense as advisors, but they withdrew their support after Roddenberry, ever the provocateur, pressed ahead with an episode titled 'To Kill A Man', about racial prejudice in the Marine Corps. *The Lieutenant's* days were numbered after that.

The Lieutenant was canned in 1964, and Roddenberry swiftly began work on the pitch that would, just a few years later, become *Star Trek*. In fact, that original treatment was a thrifty blend of various story ideas Roddenberry had been toying with over the years. One rejected pitch, from 1956, focused on the crew of a cruise ship. Another had an airship, peopled by a multiracial crew, travelling the world. The difference this time was that Roddenberry had given the pitch an attention-grabbing science fiction makeover.

Star Trek was never a ratings topper over its three years on television. In fact, it veered perilously close to cancellation at the end of its second year, only to be given a last-minute reprieve (although it was moved to the less hallowed slot of 10pm on Friday nights). Roddenberry, pissed off and burned out, stepped down from his day-to-day running of *Star Trek* after its second year. The show's third and final season was overseen by the



THE LIEUTENANT

It could almost be a Trivial Pursuit question: "What's the only TV series Gene Roddenberry created in his lifetime that doesn't have 'Star Trek' in the title?" The answer, FYI, is *The Lieutenant*, a single-season drama aired on NBC between 1963 and 1964 about life in the US Marine Corps. To be fair though, it's only been in the past five years (ever since it was released on DVD), that *Trek* fans have been able to scrutinise what was Gene Roddenberry's first ever self-created series. And there's a lot that feels recognisably Roddenberry-esque, from the series' socially conscious spirit (one episode, 'To Kill A Man', which dealt with racism within the Marine Corps, proved such a hot potato for NBC, they buried it) to the name of its lead character, Second Lieutenant William Tiberius Rice. It even boasts early TV appearances from many *Trek* regulars, such as Leonard Nimoy, Nichelle Nichols, Walter Koenig and Majel Barrett.

A racially diverse crew was a priority for him.



less visionary Fred Freiberger.

Star Trek was also never, at the time, a prized asset for Paramount. It took over 15 years, it's said, for the series to become profitable (even in 1982 the series was \$500,000 in the red) and the show had the stink of failure about it. Roddenberry felt that he was "perceived as the guy who made the show that was an expensive flop". He later said of the years after *Star Trek*: "My dreams were going downhill because I could not get work after the original series was cancelled."

Roddenberry had been aching to break into movies for as long as he had been writing. There were various near-scrapes, including an attempt to reboot the moribund *Tarzan* franchise, but, when that was downgraded to a TV movie, he bolted.

Roddenberry's first big screen credit was to come with a tawdry sexploitation flick titled *Pretty Maids All In A Row*. It was directed by Roger Vadim, the Euro auteur who had introduced the world to Brigitte Bardot in *And God Created Woman* and helped make Jane Fonda a futuristic pin-up with *Barbarella*, but even his super-hip name attached to the movie couldn't save it. *Pretty Maids All In A Row*

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ROD RODDENBERRY

bombed (although Quentin Tarantino once named it as one of his top 12 all-time movies), and Roddenberry's dreams of big screen glory were dashed.

With little writing work on the horizon, Roddenberry began to fill his time guesting at science fiction conventions. If he couldn't feel respected in the meeting rooms of the major studios and networks, at conventions he was lionised. Here he would screen episodes of *Star Trek* and begin painting a picture of himself as the man who kicked against the corporate pricks, the radical visionary who fought against a philistine and reactionary network.

He was still pitching to those networks however. His 1969 divorce had him paying \$2,000 a month to his ex-wife and Roddenberry needed the bucks. One pitch, *Genesis II*, a joylessly solemn post-apocalyptic drama about a Buck Rogers-like character from the 20th century waking up in the 22nd, made it to pilot stage, but in the end CBS, looking for a more seemingly sure-fire ratings champ, opted for a *Planet Of The Apes* series.

Equally luckless was *The Questor Tapes*, which headlined Robert Foxworth as an

NIMOY V RODDENBERRY

Much is made of the frictions within the cast of *TOS*, but none were more toxic than the long-simmering feud between Leonard Nimoy and Gene Roddenberry. The first cracks in their relationship appeared in 1966 when Roddenberry, along with his no-nonsense, acid-tongued attorney, Leonard Maizlish, demanded a cut of Nimoy's fee for his album, *Mr Spock's Music From Outer Space*. Later, they would put in a claim for a 20 per cent cut of any of Nimoy's personal appearances.

When it came to *Star Trek's* return in the Seventies, Nimoy had no intention of returning as Spock. The man who, only a few years before, had penned a book titled *I Am Not Spock* had butted head too many times with his former boss. When Nimoy's agent called about the movie, the actor told him: "If you ever call me again about *Star Trek*, you're fired."

He was eventually sweet-talked into signing on for *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* by a young Jeffrey Katzenberg (later one of the founders of DreamWorks but at the time the assistant to Paramount's head, Barry Diller). Relenting, he found himself loathing Roddenberry's script ideas, and so, working with William Shatner, set about devising a workable third act, as Roddenberry was gently eased out of the project.



➤ android with an incomplete memory searching for his creator (so, a little bit Data, a little bit *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*). But Roddenberry found himself forever butting heads with Universal, who wanted numerous format changes. Unable to come to a compromise, Gene Roddenberry walked.

During this time, Roddenberry was still dining out on *Star Trek*, and, at the beginning of 1973, there seemed hope that *Star Trek* might return, only this time as animated series. The company Filimation beat out Hanna-Barbera for the cartoon rights, and although Roddenberry had no interest in running the show on a day-by-day basis, he corralled together most of the creative talent for the series' 22-episode run, including

of the networks were interested.

The first rumbles of *Star Trek's* second coming were felt in the mid-Seventies. The initial idea was for a new TV series, and indeed plans were being drawn up for a two-hour pilot, and a series of 13 episodes. But *Star Wars'* barnstorming box office performance convinced Paramount that *Star Trek* was potentially more profitable as a big screen event. Before too long, *Star Trek: Phase II*, as it had become known, had become *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*.

Roddenberry was tasked with reworking writer David Livingstone's *Phase II* pilot script, 'In Thy Image', for the multi-million dollar movie. In fact, *The Motion Picture's* script would ping-

pong between the two of them, with eventually even William Shatner and Leonard Nimoy having a crack. But unlike the television series, Roddenberry wasn't the one in charge, and his objections to one scene cooked up by his leading man were effortlessly overruled.

Roddenberry was barely involved with the *Star Trek* movie sequels. His official title on *Star Treks II-VI* was 'executive consultant', which meant he would cast his eye over any script and would make notes for the director. But, crucially, the director wasn't obliged to read them. Gene Roddenberry was a king in exile.

Which is why *Star Trek: The Next Generation* meant so much to him. In many ways, especially in those first few seasons, it's ➤

"HE GOT TO DO MORE OF WHAT HE WANTED TO DO WITH NEXT GEN"

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TOS veterans DC Fontana, David Gerrold and Marc Daniels.

Still believing there was mileage in the *Genesis II* concept, Roddenberry pitched it again to rival network ABC, with a fresh monicker – *Planet Earth* – and a new leading man in the livelier John Saxon. But it wasn't picked up. Neither was his next pilot, the occult detective drama *Spectre*. It seemed that unless that programme had '*Star Trek*' in the title, none



The Enterprise launched a universe.



Roddenberry stepped away from the films.

ROD RODDENBERRY

We talk to Rod Roddenberry, son of Gene Roddenberry and Majel Barrett and keeper of the *Star Trek* flame...

What are your memories of your father?

Dad was dad to me. He didn't sit me down tell me what life was like in World War II or working for the LAPD. I was simply too young. What I remember is *The Next Generation*. I was 13 when that started and I remember some of the rumblings around the household when he was developing that.

You began researching your father's life for the documentary *Trek Nation*. Did you find out anything surprising about him?

I knew him as dad, and he was the authority figure but I saw some of his vices and his losses of temper. I've spent a lot of time around fans and everyone was putting him up on this pedestal and praising him. I needed balance and it was difficult for me to find the man. So what I learned was that this was a journey for me to humanise him. In the end, it allowed me to bring him off the pedestal and say, wow, this is someone I can identify with, and not only that, but love. You can't love a Greek God when fans are putting him up so high, you can't really understand the man behind the myth.

***Trek* is known for its progressive view of the world. How political was your father?**

When my father was around his friends, he would love to have challenging conversations. He would bring up drugs, sex, prostitution, marriage, religion, you name it. He would, not simply for shock value, love to take up the absurd point of view, just to get people to think. People credit my father as a producer and a writer, but really he was a futurist – he loved thinking about where we were, where we are now, and where will we be years from now.

What was his attitude to *Star Trek*? He seemed to both love it and resent it.

I don't think he was able to do everything he wanted to in the original series. There were limitations, so I think he was just happy to get out some of the stories that he did. I think he was proud that he'd built a team of people who made *Star Trek* what it is and I think he enjoyed having a crew that showed a better humanity. But his baby was really *The Next Generation*. He got to do more of what he wanted to do with *Next Gen*. But saying that, I know on some level he was ready to leave *Star Trek*. I think he was



ready to leave right before he passed away. I think he'd made his mark, he'd said what he'd had to say.

You're now an executive producer of *Star Trek: Discovery*. Do you think he'd approve of the latest series?

Discovery is new and different and it should be. When things are new and different, no matter what they are, sometimes they're difficult for people to get used to. I can't answer that, but I would love to have a conversation with him about that.

What's your favourite *Star Trek* series?

I was a late bloomer when it came to *Star Trek*. I was into *Knight Rider* and *Starsky And Hutch*. I watched *The Next Generation* but I didn't get it at that young age. When I finally saw [Original Series episode] 'Devil In The Dark', it snapped. The 'twist' at the end, where we're the devil in the dark, that took my breath away. That was the moment where I was like: 'Oh, this is what everyone is saying about *Star Trek*!' But my love, my passion, is *Next Generation* because it shows a wiser humanity, it shows us as a calmer, more collected people who are willing to use logic, reason and also willing to listen to others. Granted, that's not action or excitement, but that's what I love about *Star Trek*. I don't care about the science fiction of *Star Trek*, I love the philosophy.

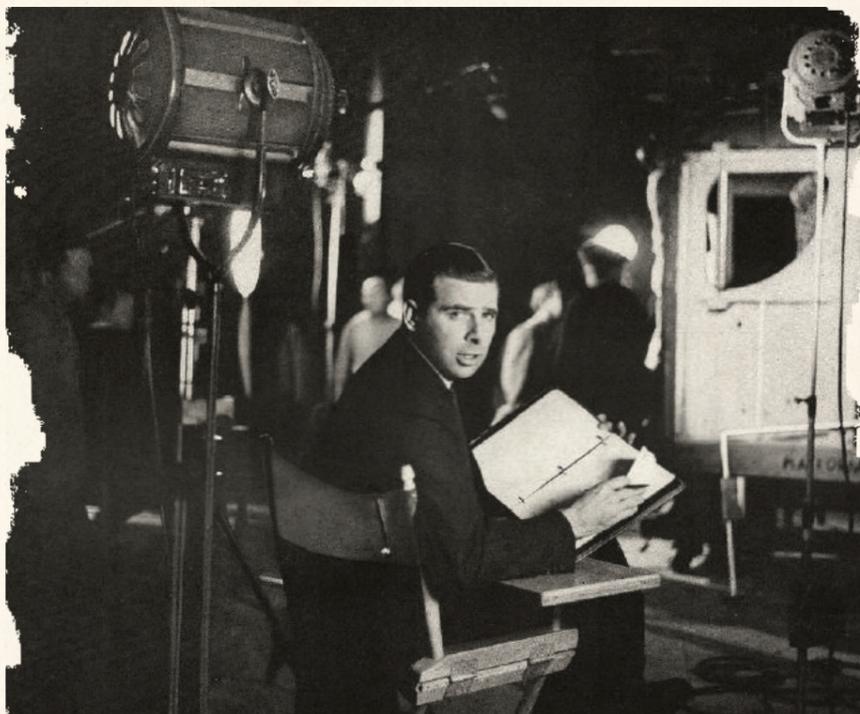
➤ the purest example of Roddenberry's dreamily idealistic vision of *Star Trek*.

The initial brainwave for a rebooted series had come, in the summer of 1986, not from him though, but from Paramount. And Roddenberry had actually turned them down on their first offer, unimpressed with their initial plans for the series. But Paramount knew that any *Star Trek* series launched without the blessing of its original creator would be a damn hard sell, especially without the comforting presence of Shatner, Nimoy or Kelley.

So, with a bounteous pay packet (he was awarded a bonus of \$1 million in addition to an ongoing salary to produce the series),

"PEOPLE CREDIT MY FATHER AS A PRODUCER AND A WRITER BUT REALLY, HE WAS A FUTURIST"

ROD RODDENBERRY



© Mandalay/Orion Pictures

Gene Roddenberry was once again the head honcho of a *Star Trek* TV series. His health, however, in 1986, was the worst it had ever been. His recreational drug use had ballooned in the fallow 'executive consultant' years and his drinking was so out of control he checked himself into a drying out clinic upon getting the *Next Generation* gig.

Although the main characters and the basic setup of *The Next Generation* have Roddenberry's prints all over it, the reality is his grip on the series weakened considerably after that first season. Maurice Hurley was brought in as showrunner for the show's second year, and, although Roddenberry was still being consulted

("you don't know the difference between shields and deflectors!" he bellowed at Hurley during one meeting), his health was deteriorating fast.

A stroke in 1989 confined him to a wheelchair and his involvement in Season Three was virtually non-existent. Then, on 24 October 1991, he suffered a cardiac arrest and died, outside the offices of his doctor. Two weeks later, the Spock-starring *Star Trek: The Next Generation* episode 'Unification' aired with a on-air dedication to its late creator.

A year after his death, some of his ashes were flown in to space on the shuttle Columbia. Five years after that, on 21 April 1997, seven grams of his cremated remains were launched

into Earth orbit aboard a Pegasus XL rocket. The rocket remained in orbit until 2002 when it disintegrated in the atmosphere.

Twenty-seven years on from his death, Gene Roddenberry's name is still there, emblazoned over the credits of every episode of the latest *Star Trek* series, *Discovery*. It is a fitting tribute to a man whose stirringly bright-eyed vision of the future helped birth a culture-quake phenomenon, a writer who really did go where no writer had ever gone before. ✨

Star Trek: The Original Series is available now on Blu-ray from Paramount.

THE POSTHUMOUS SHOWS

After Gene Roddenberry died, many old projects were exhumed and finally turned into TV shows...



EARTH: FINAL CONFLICT

Roddenberry's aborted Seventies project titled *Battleground: Earth*, about a group of aliens landing on Earth under a banner of peace (only with ulterior motives),

finally made it to the screen in 1997, lasting for five seasons.



ANDROMEDA

Originally titled *Gene Roddenberry's Andromeda*, this more obviously *Star Trek*-styled series headlined Kevin Sorbo as Dylan Hunt, captain of the starship *Andromeda*, whose mission is was to restore peace and civilisation to the universe. It lasted five seasons between 2001 and 2005.



Roddenberry finally returned with *TNG*.



TOS overcame low ratings and prospered.

TOP 10 GENE RODDENBERRY



1 THE MENAGERIE (STAR TREK)

The *Star Trek Original Series'* only two-part story, this episode actually reuses footage from the then-unaired first pilot, *The Cage*, into a rather pleasingly rich episode.



2 THE SAVAGE CURTAIN (STAR TREK)

Aliens force Kirk and Spock to join forces with figures of good throughout history (Abraham Lincoln, Surak) vs. evil historical figures (Hitler, Genghis Khan).



3 DATALORE (STAR TREK: THE NEXT GENERATION)

In Roddenberry's last writing credit on a *Star Trek* series, the Enterprise crew discover and reassemble Data's long-lost 'brother', Lore.



4 THE OMEGA GLORY (STAR TREK)

In this episode, Kirk goes head-to-head with insane starship captain and a deadly plague while also trying to stop an intertribal war.



5 THE CAGE (STAR TREK)

Star Trek's first pilot episode. It is missing William Shatner's unmistakable twinkle, but it is still a pretty fascinating glimpse into a *Star Trek* was never was...

TREK EPISODES



6 A PRIVATE LITTLE WAR (STAR TREK)

Another episode from the original series. In 'A Private Little War', Kirk attempts to protect primitive aliens from Klingon interference.



7 HIDE AND Q (STAR TREK: THE NEXT GENERATION)

The Enterprise encounters the omnipotent Q once more, as he tempts Commander Riker by endowing him with the powers of the Q Continuum.



8 BREAD AND CIRCUSES (STAR TREK)

In this episode of *TOS* entitled 'Bread And Circuses' the illustrious crew of the Enterprise encounter a planet that's patterned itself on ancient Rome.



9 ENCOUNTER AT FARPOINT (STAR TREK: THE NEXT GENERATION)

Next Gen's first episode. It's not quite the series we'd come to love, but it's still a comforting slice of vintage-style *Trek*.



10 CHARLIE X (STAR TREK)

Roddenberry only came up with the story for this one (it is actually written by his protege, DC Fontana), but this tale of a super-powered teen is one of *TOS's* finest episodes.