Movie review of: TV Series “Route 66”

“Route 66,” executive producer Herbert B. Leonard. Television series aired 1960–64; it is now available on DVD (VCI Video, DVD release 2004).

I confess that I am not much of a TV devotee. However, available now through the ever-reliable Amazon is a remarkable series from the early days of television that was, in terms of quality and content, revolutionary. This recent release celebrates the show’s 50th anniversary.

“Route 66” played for only four seasons, 1960–1964. It was a sort of picaresque, realist series — mainly dramatic, though occasionally comedic — built around two central characters, Buz Murdock and Tod Stiles. For the first two and a half seasons, the fine actor George Maharis played Buz. Then he was replaced (for health reasons) by Glenn Corbett, who played Lincoln Case. Throughout, the second character was Tod Stiles, played by Martin Milner, also a fine actor. The most memorable episodes, however, were the ones involving the character Buz.

In TV talk, the series was a combination of “episodic” style, with the main characters appearing in every episode, and “anthology,” in which every week a whole new cast of supporting actors appeared in an entirely new story. In movie terms, the series concept was a classic “buddy” show, melded with a “road” picture. (Think of the Bob Hope – Bing Crosby “road” pictures meeting “Easy Rider.”)

In the series premier, Tod, an upper-class kid who went to Yale, finds himself orphaned when his father dies suddenly, leaving him with only a car, a convertible Corvette. He decides to drive around the country, taking the legendary Route 66, with his friend Buz, a tough young man who grew up in an orphanage and learned survival skills in “Hell’s Kitchen,” a rough bit of New York turf. Buz had worked for Tod’s father, so that’s how they knew each other. Each week they visited various towns and cities, hiring on for a wide variety of jobs — as construction workers, fishermen, shrimpers, loggers, oil rig workers, ranch hands, factory workers, salesmen, or whatever work they could get.

The dynamic between Buz and Tod was interesting. Tod was a tall, sandy-haired all-American type, while Buz was a more uninhibited working-class guy from the streets. In many of the early episodes, Buz got into fistfights with other characters. Their occasional moral clashes were all the more interesting for that reason.

Along the way, they became involved in the lives of the people they met, people for the most part with troubles or a dark side. The sorts of characters who appear in this series are not the typical upbeat characters who inhabit most of TV land. We meet such people as a tormented jazz musician, a has-been fighter, a self-destructive crop duster, an abused mute girl, a vengeful blind dance instructor, a hunted pregnant Indian girl, and so on.

Besides the consistently good acting by Milner and Maharis (Maharis was a product of the Actor’s Studio in New York, and had substantial stage and TV experience), the series was outstanding for the quality of the supporting actors. They included many actors who went on to notable careers. Part of the fun of watching the series is spying people whom you know very well from their later work: Alan Alda, Ed Asner, Martin Balsam, Tom Bosley, James Brown, James Caan, Robert Duval, Gene Hackman, Ron Howard, David Janssen, DeForest Kelley, George Kennedy, Harvey Korman, Cloris Leachman, Jack Lord, Lee Marvin, Walter Matthau, Julie Newmar, Leslie Nielson, Suzanne Pleshette, Robert Redford, Burt Reynolds, William Shatner, Rod Steiger, Jack Warden. Redford, by the way, was considered for the role of Tod Stiles.

Also making the series outstanding were the creators, Stirling Silliphant and Herbert Leonard. Silliphant was an award-winning writer for movies (“In the Heat of the Night”) and television (including the series “Naked City,” 1958–1963). He wrote about three-fourths of the episodes of “Route 66.” Leonard was a distinguished producer, with such series as “Naked City” and “Rin Tin Tin” to his credit. (Rin Tin Tin, the German shepherd who “starred” in a hit series, appears in one of the early episodes of “Route 66.”)

Silliphant and Leonard did something unheard of: they filmed on location all over the United States. To this day, “Route 66” is the only fictional TV series filmed on location throughout the country. Silliphant himself toured the country looking for good locations — often grim and gritty locales — that fitted the “realist” orientation of the creators.

Usually, Silliphant’s dialogue was exceptionally literate. It used a lot of beatnik slang and existentialist-sounding quotes. Sometimes this came across as a bit pretentious, but it was usually apt. Clearly, Silliphant was influenced by Jack Kerouac’s beat classic “On the Road,” which had appeared three years before the series began. Indeed, the obvious debt that Silliphant owed to Kerouac led Kerouac to consider suing Silliphant for plagiarism (at least according to Kerouac’s biographer Dennis McNally).

Add to this a terrific score by composer Nelson Riddle, not to mention one of the most gorgeous cars ever designed, and “Route 66” is a delight. The episodes hold up well as drama after half a century. But one additional benefit from watching the series now is that it allows the viewer to see the rapid pace of change wrought by our dynamic capitalist system.

This is especially interesting if you are, like me, old enough to remember the times when the series was produced. To cite one example: As Buz and Tod go from town to town, they take a variety of jobs, almost all of them “blue collar” jobs. But the America of readily available low- to medium-skill work is long gone, replaced by an epistemic (or postindustrial) economy. In one of the more comedic episodes (filmed at UCLA, in front of an enormous room-filling IBM mainframe from that era), a hapless Tod tries desperately to learn programming, while an equally hapless Buz tries his hand at sales.

We also notice the enormous social transformations of the past 50 years — especially in the role of women. In all the episodes I watched, Tod and Buz get jobs, and invariably all the other workers are men. Women workers are scarcely seen.

Another difference you notice has to do with the homogenization of American society. The cities Buz and Tod visited in the ’60s had marked regional differences, which time and globalization have tended to diminish over the decades.

That is one of the instructive things about watching a fine old series such as “Route 66.” You get a vivid visual sense of the rapid changes in our folkways brought about by what Schumpeter called the “creative destruction” that is capitalism. But you are also instructed again about the deeper and permanent psychological verities of our human nature.

**Gary James Jason**