Staying power

What is it that transforms a few TV programs into cult classics while thousands of others fade into oblivion?

Article by Steve Daley

There are but 29 original, one-hour episodes of "Star Trek:" But after more than 20 years, on and off, it goes, repeated in syndication, seen at almost every hour of the day and night, playing in virtually every television market.

Mr. Spock (Leonard Nimoy), Capt. James T. Kirk (William Shatner) and Mr. Scott (MontGomery Clift) in the original "Star Trek" episode "The Menagerie." The episode, which

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hey come and go, as ephemeral as a vapor, as long-lived as a fossilized fish. At the same time, in the annals of television, there are a handful of programs that have managed to transcend the normal course of events. These programs are often referred to as "cult classics." They are those that have a cult following and are often re-run on TV shows and in syndication.

The reason for their success is not always clear. Some programs, like "Star Trek," have a dedicated fan base that follows every episode. Others, like "The Twilight Zone," have a more general appeal and are appreciated by a wide audience.

In the case of "Star Trek," the success can be attributed to a combination of factors. The show was innovative in its time, with its use of special effects and its exploration of science fiction themes. It also had a strong cast of characters, with William Shatner and Leonard Nimoy in particular becoming household names.

But what is it about "Star Trek" that has allowed it to endure for over 50 years? One possibility is that the show's themes of exploration and the search for new worlds are timeless and resonate with audiences of all ages.

Another factor is the show's influence on popular culture. "Star Trek" has inspired numerous books, movies, and TV shows, and has become a cultural phenomenon.

In conclusion, the success of "Star Trek" and other cult classics is difficult to quantify. But it is clear that these programs have a special appeal that sets them apart from the vast majority of TV shows that come and go without making much of an impact.
TV Classics

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"M*A*S*H" and "All in the Family" may be doomed to linger long after "Jack and Mike" is a memory. But it remains to be seen if a future generation of college kids will have a habit of "M*A*S*H" or "The Mary Tyler Moore Show," as college kids have done with "Star Trek" since its inception in 1966.

Logic would dictate that a commercial medium, a vehicle dedicated to commerce and the abbreviation of society's attention span, could not give birth to mythic figures. But after 33 years, that would seem to suit Lucy Ricardo, Mr. Spock and Ralph Kramden short. Or perhaps our definition of mythic figures will have to be adjusted for the television age.

Bette Midler defined the parameters where the appraised cable-TV boom as follows: "100 channels. Not enough to watch."

The great mass of television devours programming nowadays, so that the mere presence of "Laramie" or "Baa Baa Black Sheep" on someone's set does not translate into permanence. Earlier this year, the Christian Broadcasting Network swept up a laudable pot of "Hezeltown," a new-disco melodrama that aired briefly on NBC. And a nationwide cable system bought 13 episodes of "Buffalo Bill," an acerbic sitcom of recent vintage whose passion was greatly lamented when it was canceled in 1984.

What follows is a shorthand look at five television programs that abide, five programs that, for sometimes disparate, sometimes similar and sometimes inexplicable reasons, have defied the medium's acbritual tables. The list is arbitrary, of course, and fans of "Fawlty Towers," "Leave It to Beaver" and, say, the show-loved "The Prisoner" are set to con-Test.

These five shows endure for reasons other than miraculous station managers with hours to fill. They touch a chord, however curious, and seem destined to be around as long as we remain enchanted by the blue light in our living rooms.

The starship USS Enterprise set sail on Sept. 8, 1966, Thursday nights on NBC. For three short seasons "Star Trek" chronicled the exploits of Capt. James Kirk, the Vulcans Mr. Spock and the crew through an intergalactic adventure set 200 years in the future. There were Klingons and Romulans and questions about Mr. Spock's starry associations, and there were no ratings. Throughout 1966-67 "Star Trek" was a double-dyed Nしなきな剧

After its second season "Star Trek" was marked for network extinction. A letter-writing campaign was mounted in Los Angeles, a pen-and-pencil assault that deposited more than half a million pieces of mail on NBC desks. "Trekies," as they were beginning to be called, organized marches and demon- strations, mailed more letters and celebrated when the network announced, on the air, that the Enterprise was being refitted for a third season, in a new time slot.

A year later NBC canceled the show. This time, there weren't enough letters. Public indignation and a clear passion for the show among True Believers wasn't sufficient to save Dr. McCoy, Sulu and Uhura. The Enterprise was set adrift in television space, or so it seemed.

"Star Trek" did reappear for two years in the early 1970s, but in animated form on Saturday mornings on NBC. Original cast members supplied the voices and producer Gene Roddenberry, the chief Trekker, signed on as a consultant. It seemed an anomalous end.

That was then. This is now, with the November release of "Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home" in movie houses across the country. Since that dark day in 1969 when NBC brought the programming hammer down on "Star Trek," there probably hasn't been a 24-hour period when the original pro-

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