

“EVER RIDE THE WAVES IN OKLAHOMA?”

By Michael Ventura

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Austin, 1962. Just south of the University of Texas, a building is going up. It might be Dobie Mall. We're facing northeast on an unfinished floor that's open to the sky. The camera pans to follow Tod (Martin Milner) riding a cable suspended from a crane. A small UT stadium is far in the background; directly below, a residential street continues north. The camera pans west to reveal a not-yet-gigantic university, its tower, and a few buildings along the Drag. The rest is treetops. Nothing obstructs a view of distant hills.

Then we see Austin's 1962 streets and people – looking a little like a foreign country, quaint, almost primitive. We see Brackenridge Hospital; a doctor's office (not a set, the real thing); cheap residential rentals near the university; a furnished room, with its bathroom and hallway (also the real thing); and a highway outside town. Then we're on the outskirts of Kerrville in a school for the blind on the grounds of The Texas Lions Clubs Camp for Crippled Children. Several blind residents and teachers have speaking parts.

We're watching an episode of *Route 66*, co-created and mostly written by Stirling Silliphant. Titled “Even Stones Have Eyes,” and written by Barry Trivers, it features series regular George Maharis as Buz Murdock, blinded by an injury during construction work. The excellent Barbara Barrie is his blind teacher. The teaching facility is not mere backdrop; its grounds, rooms, methods, and people are intrinsic to this bitterly romantic story.

Historians, sociologists, anthropologists, I invite you to rejoice. For the first time, all 116 episodes of *Route 66* are available in one box set. *Route 66* was shot on location (interiors as well as exteriors) from the fall of 1960 to the spring of 1964 – years that were arguably the apex of American power. Using locals as extras, in their natural garb, the show filmed across the USA: in cities, villages, mountains, and deserts -- probably without meaning to, *Route 66* created an unparalleled visual historical record.

Imagine if we had four years of such footage filmed in Plato's Greece, the Rome of Caesar, or Elizabethan England. That is what is now available for the study of America's so-called Camelot years. In a time when broadcast news was still mostly verbal and movies and TV were mostly shot in studios, *Route 66* shot everywhere. Not quite TV *verite*, but close enough.

Silliphant loved Texas, apparently, and filmed in Austin, Kerrville, Killkenny, Mesquite, Corpus Christi, Houston, and Dallas. He shot in Chimayo and Carlsbad, N.M.; Catonsville, Md.; Boiling Springs, Pittsburg, and Philadelphia, Pa; Page and Apache Junction, Ariz.; Poland Spring and Portland, Maine; Grand Island, Miss.; New Orleans and Venice, La.; Chicago; Gloucester and Boston, Mass.; Memphis, Tenn.; Mt. Snow, Vt.; Reno and Carson City, Nev.; Eureka, Colo.; Minneapolis; the Utah badlands; all over Florida and California; Tijuana and Lobos Island, Mexico.

Nearly 100 hours of it. See Malibu when it was funky. See Cleveland and Saint Louis when they thrived. See Tucson and Santa Fe when they were tiny. Go inside the living rooms, bedrooms, police stations, hospitals, stores, nightclubs, offices, and closets of a vanished era. Silliphant didn't “Hollywood” his locations. He wanted everything actual. Historians should build him a statue.

If you can tear your eyes away from the settings, *Route 66* presents the art of acting at an exceptional level. I count 33 guest stars who, at one time or another, won an Academy Award, an Emmy, a Tony, and/or a Golden Globe, including Joan Crawford, Buster Keaton, Dorothy Malone, Walter Matthau, Robert Duval, Lee Marvin, Martin Sheen, Tuesday Weld, Tammy Grimes, James Coburn, Lois Nettleton, and Lois Smith. And nominees like Ethel Waters, Sessue Hayakawa, and Julie Newmar appear as well.

That level of talent shows up for good scripts, but they were scripts that might puzzle historians when they reflect that *Route 66* was a CBS hit when most areas had no more than four channels and you didn't have a hit unless a hefty chunk of the middle class preferred your show to the other three. The success of *Route 66* presents an irksome spectrum of questions.

The truism is that America lost its innocence when Kennedy was shot or when hippies questioned the establishment or when we blundered into Vietnam. But in 1962 none of that had happened. So why is a middle-class white man saying these words to a middle-class audience in Silliphant's "Go Read the River"? More to the point: Why is the audience listening?

"Somehow, somewhere, a simple, beautiful thing, a single morality, a single set of standards, was smashed like an atom into ten million pieces. And now – now what's right for a man can be wrong for his business, and what's right for his business can be wrong for his country, and what's right for his country can be wrong for the world."

Sounds awfully contemporary. And not at all innocent. These, too:

"Soda Pop and Paper Flags" (early 1963, written by John McGreevey): "One town is as good as another, but they all have one thing in common: scared people." In our nation's golden age? Scared of what?

"Ever Ride the Waves in Oklahoma?" (1962, written by Silliphant): "We belong to a species that can protect itself against everything, except each other."

"Mon Petit Chou" (1961, written by Silliphant and directed by Sam Peckinpah): "Who says this is a life? This is an ambush."

"A Gift for a Warrior" (1962, written by Larry Marcus): "Why does God play such games with us? Why does he hide something in our hearts that we don't even know is there until it betrays us?"

"From an Enchantress Fleeing" (1962, written by Silliphant): "You know what a model husband is? That's a man who wears a white flag for a suit, and every day he negotiates peace. And always he wakes up in the same position: unconditional surrender."

"Between Hello and Goodbye" (1962, written by Silliphant): "We're all in aquariums, aren't we? Now and then we bump noses against the glass. ...It wasn't glass, was it? A boundary we couldn't break through. But wasn't that a face we saw, staring in, watching us? But whose face? Whose?"

"Love Is a Skinny Kid" (1962, written by Silliphant): Tuesday Weld won't remove her mask. She points to all the nice people. "Make them take off their masks and I'll take off mine." Later, Maharis says, "Love is a skinny kid that catches cold standing outside a locked door begging to come in."

Episode after episode of dialogue like that on a hit CBS show.

The question repeats: “Why were so many people listening?” This wasn’t televised comfort food; this was psychological agitation. So what need did it speak to in an era that was supposedly prosperous and happy?

Our factories were humming. We didn’t yet know about environmental pollution. A gas station sign in “Somehow It Gets To Be Tomorrow” priced regular at 20 cents a gallon. Marriage was strictly between a man and a woman. Abortion and homosexuality were outlawed. Most women were housewives; two-parent families raised most kids. Public education was pretty good. The national debt was pocket-change. Minorities were heavily outnumbered. Jobs were plentiful. Republicans and Democrats were equally civil. Expensive experts promised that the future would be wonderful.

So why did people listen to Stirling Silliphant and his crew in an America with plenty of everything, an America that many today miss and want back?

Route 66 spoke to a restlessness, an unease, and a sense that, for better or worse, we were changing – not the country, not yet, but we ourselves.

To be continued.

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