HISTORY This Week EP 336: Star Trek Premieres
EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

NOTE: This transcript may contain errors.

Sally Helm: HISTORY This Week. September 8, 1966. I’m Sally Helm.

Star Trek Archival: Captains log, star date 15-13-.1

Sally Helm: For the first time, the starship Enterprise appears on screen. And almost half of all the TVs that are on in the US in that moment are tuned in. It is the premier of a new, futuristic TV show: Star Trek.

Star Trek Archival: On board the enterprise: Mr. Spock, temporarily in command.

Sally Helm: Captain Kirk, and the ship’s chief medical officer, Dr. McCoy, beam down to the surface of Planet M113. Their bodies re-materialize in front of a set that is…pretty obviously fake. The idea of “beaming down” is now iconic—even if you’ve never seen Star Trek, you might have said the phrase, “beam me up, Scotty!” (And if you have seen Star Trek, you might know this is a famous misquotation). But this “beaming down” effect was born of necessity. It was too complicated, in 1966, to show the Enterprise actually landing on distant planets. And the whole concept of Star Trek is that Captain Kirk and his crew will be visiting distant planets all the time. So, the show came up with a work-around. The actors dematerialize on the Enterprise and re-materialize wherever they need to go. Like, teleporting. On screen, on planet M113, their bodies shimmer for a moment, and then appear. The effect is actually made using, among other things, a high-intensity light and falling aluminum dust.

On this new planet, Dr. McCoy is set to examine some patients. One of them is his old lover, Nancy Crater. When McCoy finally gets to do the examination, the futuristic instruments that he’s using are actually a pair of weird looking saltshakers. The props department bought them to be used on board the Enterprise as the saltshakers of the future, but Star Trek’s creator, Gene Roddenberry, thought they’d be better used as surgical instruments. They look that weird. He finds a different saltshaker, a more regular-looking glass one, to use on board the ship.

Salt will in fact become a key plot element in this first episode of Star Trek.

Star Trek Archival: Salt. You did ask them about more salt tablets. I’ll take care of the provisioning, Nancy…

Sally Helm: Dr. McCoy’s old lover seems to be strangely obsessed with salt. But all that is to come. Before the opening credits, all we know is that something strange is going on with Nancy Crater. And that the world of Star Trek is set to be something entirely new.

Star Trek Archival: Space. The Final Frontier. These are the voyages of the Starship Enterprise.

Sally Helm: Today: a TV show tries:

Star Trek Archival: To boldly go where no man has gone before.
Sally Helm: Why did NBC take a chance on a creator who had already once gotten them in trouble with none other than the US military? And how did Star Trek push the boundaries of TV in this galaxy?

David A. Goodman is a television writer. And a major Trekkie. Or... Trekker?

David Goodman: I think there was a general acknowledgement that if you weren't a Star Trek fan, you called them Trekkies but that if you were a Star Trek fan, you referred to yourself as a Trekker.

Sally Helm: Oh, okay.

David Goodman: And Trekkie initially seemed to have, to Star Trek fans, a derogatory smell to it.

Sally Helm: Mm-hmm sort of like you guys are nerds’ kind of thing?

David Goodman: Yes. And we were anyway so, [laughs] I have no trouble being referred to as a Trekkie.

Sally Helm: When Goodman was writing for the animated show *Futurama*, he reunited the original cast of Star Trek and got them to appear in an episode. That took him from regular fan to industry Star Trek expert. He later got hired as a writer on *Star Trek: Enterprise*, and also wrote several Star Trek books. He says his latest show, *The Orville*, is an homage to the Star Trek franchise.

David Goodman: So, I have written for Star Trek, written, uh, things that are like Star Trek, that make fun of Star Trek. But at core I am a very big Star Trek fan.

Sally Helm: And you are also Julia Press's uncle. Am I right? Producer Julia Press.

David Goodman: Yes. I guess for journalistic openness here. Yes, I am the uncle of the show's producer.

Sally Helm: Julia, who is listening. Hello, Julia. This is your Uncle David.


David Goodman: Hi niece, Julia. That's what I call her niece Julia, it's weird.

Sally Helm: Goodman was first introduced to the Star Trek series by his uncle.

David Goodman: One of my earliest memories is I found it scary, when I was very young. I walked in on my Uncle Marvin. We lived in a two-family house and my uncle was watching it.

Sally Helm: He said, Nephew David, come watch this show with me.
David Goodman: Nephew David. Yes. He referred to me as [laughs] But, eventually I think I was in fifth or sixth grade and I had two cousins named Michael. Both of them were big Star Trek fans and they both in their own way introduced me to it. And there was something about the storytelling. There was something about the creation of this world in outer space in the future that hooked me and, I haven't looked back.

Sally Helm: The creator of that world was a TV writer, like Goodman. Gene Roddenberry. He’s become a legend. Goodman has heard lots of lore about him over the years.

David Goodman: Somebody commented once all his suits seemed to come with stains, he could put on a new suit, and he would immediately look baggy and disheveled. When he pitched, he would sort of mumble and speak under his breath and sort of required other people to lean forward, to listen to what he was saying.

Sally Helm: Roddenberry had been a pilot in World War II. Survived a horrific crash. And when he came home, before he became that disheveled TV writer, he got a day job working as a policeman. There, he got assigned to be speech writer for the Los Angeles chief of police.

David Goodman: Well, during the 1950s, when he was doing this, a big show on the air was a cop show called Dragnet. And the premise of Dragnet was presenting real police stories.

Dragnet Archival: Ladies and gentlemen, the story you are about to see is true. The names have been changed to protect the innocent.

David Goodman: And it became known among the LAPD that the producer of Dragnet would buy stories from actual policemen. And this whole system developed at the LAPD where a cop would say, I was just involved in this investigation. He'd send some notes to Gene Roddenberry in the public affairs office. Gene Roddenberry would type up the premise of an episode, and Roddenberry would split a hundred dollars with the cop who brought him the idea.

Sally Helm: Huh. Wow. Is kind of a training ground. He's writing sort of episode after episode, a little sketch.

David Goodman: Yeah, exactly. And, but he wasn't really writing scripts yet. He was just writing sort of these, these premises.

Sally Helm: Soon, he starts writing full freelance scripts for television. And in 1956, as the saying goes, he quits his day job. Commits himself to TV writing full time. It goes pretty well. Within a few years, he's managed to pitch and sell his first series idea to NBC. It's a show called The Lieutenant.

David Goodman: And this was a modern-day drama about the peacetime military. And this show had all the cooperation of the Marines. They provided uniforms and equipment; they provided the use of Camp Pendleton for free and this obviously was very attractive to the studio MGM that produced it because it saved them a lot of money.
Sally Helm: So, everyone’s happy with Roddenberry! Until he writes an episode about racism in the military.

Lieutenant Archival: *I'm having a few problems with your fiancé myself... They concern Private Cameron's ethnic background.*

David Goodman: Television didn't deal with race at all, in the sixties. They never really dealt honestly with any real issue. And so, the fact of doing this really scared NBC. The Marines pulled their support for the show, and NBC wasn't going to air the episode.

Sally Helm: Roddenberry doesn't like that one bit. But his bosses have spoken. So… he goes around his bosses. And knocks on the door of the NAACP. He asks them to put pressure on NBC to air the episode.

David Goodman: To go to an outside person and get them to pressure his own network to air his own show, their show, and make them look bad, some might say that was brave. Others might say that was foolish. So that was fairly early on in his career. His show’s canceled.

Sally Helm: Huh. Okay. So, he's out of a job now.

David Goodman: He's out of a job and, he starts sort of looking around for his next job. And he comes up with the premise for Star Trek.

Sally Helm: Roddenberry says that Star Trek will be kind of like a very popular TV Western, ‘Wagon Train.’

David Goodman: Wagon Train was about this never ending wagon train of covered wagons going from one place to another. And they never got anywhere, so that was a way to let the networks understand what this show was, which was, people on a ship going from place to place.

Sally Helm: So, it was partly just a way to be like, this is familiar. Like this is something you've seen before.

David Goodman: And similar to something you consider to be a big success.

Sally Helm: Sort of a classic sales pitch move. Like every TV show is like, it's this plus this, like these two things you like.

David Goodman: Absolutely right. We still do that. You call them comps. What's a comparison? What's this show like, and when you do that, you want to have a successful show that your show is like.

Sally Helm: Right. Of course. ‘It's like this, a terrible show that bombed, put it on the air!’ [laughs]

David Goodman: That's been my mistake a number of times.
Sally Helm: *Wagon Train* may be what Roddenberry is talking about to executives. But he also has something else on his mind. Something that harkens back to that controversial episode of his old show, *The Lieutenant*.

David Goodman: He also wanted to disguise social issues, talk about things like religion and, racism and, politics in the form of science fiction metaphor, so that he perhaps could escape the concern of networks of pissing off groups that might be offended by dealing with a controversial theme.

Sally Helm: Right, so he's like, okay, put it in space. And then I won't have this problem that I have with the Marines where they come in and right. They're mad about this, because there's no, it's like a made-up world.

David Goodman: Exactly.

Sally Helm: University of North Dakota Professor Michelle Sauer told us; this strategy actually has ancient predecessors. Like, there was a popular genre of writing in the Middle Ages called "the mirror for princes."

Michelle Sauer: Where medieval writers would construct a not real or a fictional narrative to critique current politics. That way they could avoid, I guess, being killed. And Star Trek is sort of like that.

Sally Helm: Sauer is a professor of English and gender studies. And:

Michelle Sauer: Just a nerd in general but, definitely a Trekkie or a Trekker.

Sally Helm: Like Goodman, she's been a fan since she was a kid, watching tapes in her family's VCR. An old one, where you loaded the tapes in the top.

Michelle Sauer: Actually, like the thing in Star Trek to shoot the phasers, this little thing goes, like pops up at the top. The original VCR looked like that.

Sally Helm: Sauer is a fan first. But that doesn't stop her from looking at Star Trek with an academic’s eye. She even teaches it to her students. And she said, Star Trek uses the techniques of the “mirror for princes.” In fact, it’s conceived that way from the start. Gene Roddenberry writes in his original pitch, “The time is ‘Somewhere in the future’…It could be 1995”—which then was the future— “or maybe even 2995.” The people would be totally recognizable. But they’d be jetting around on spaceships. And the themes would resonate with Roddenberry’s own time—the 1960s.

Michelle Sauer: Science fiction allows authors and the audience that engages with it to critique leaders, to make bold statements about what the society is and where it is going or where it could go if things aren't changed.

Sally Helm: So that’s what Roddenberry has in mind. He pitches MGM on this “Wagon Train to the stars.” No dice. But you know who is interested? Lucille Ball. The star of "I Love Lucy" and "The Lucy Show." A savvy performer who’s used her fame to become a Hollywood power broker.
Ball runs her own production company, Desilu. She's recently bought out her ex-husband Desi's share of the business, and is looking for new shows to develop. And her executives decide to buy this one. Star Trek. Here's David A. Goodman again.

David Goodman: And the best anecdote I ever heard about Lucy's involvement with Star Trek was her exec Herb Solow, was in a, a meeting with her. And this was during the development of Star Trek. And Lucy said, what's going on with that USO show?

Sally Helm: Wait, wait, what's the USO for those who don't know.

David Goodman: So, the USO was, the performers who would go around and entertain the troops. And Herb's like USO? Yeah. The one about the stars who are traveling around—

Sally Helm: So, she heard Star Trek and thought “ah, the stars trek around, like stars like me.”

David Goodman: She actually somehow imagined her own show, which I would watch that show too.

Sally Helm: Sounds good.

David Goodman: And it's like, oh no, no, no, Lucy, it's not about the USO, it's about a spaceship.

Sally Helm: Desilu pitches the spaceship show to CBS. That’s the network that airs Lucy's show. But CBS isn't interested. They say they already have an outer space pilot in development.

David Goodman: And the execs at Lucy's company think, okay, we're gonna take it to NBC. Now Roddenberry did not have a good relationship with NBC. He had brought the NAACP down on them on his last show. He publicly complained in the press about the cancellation of the Lieutenant. But NBC was very interested in getting in business with Lucy.

Sally Helm: It kind of makes sense. Because CBS had seen such success with Lucy, so they were like, we want a piece of something Lucy’s touching. Yeah.

David Goodman: The idea that we could be in business with Lucy and get her next hit, whatever it is, that was appealing to those executives.

Sally Helm: So, NBC says, go ahead, make a pilot. They choose one of the episodes Roddenberry had pitched. It's called "The Cage." The studio says you have eleven days to film. Goodman told us, that’s pretty standard for a pilot, but pilots are not usually this ambitious.

David Goodman: Everything had to be created from scratch. It wasn't like you were gonna get military uniforms from the costume warehouse. You had to design uniforms. You couldn't use established sets anywhere. You were gonna have to build the spaceship sets. The kinds of special effects that they were talking about doing had never really been done on a weekly basis on television.
Sally Helm: What kinds of things like people disappearing or—

David Goodman: I mean, even just, the spaceship flying through space. I mean, there were television shows that did that, but not very well. And they created new photographic processes to do the spaceship effects, the planet effects, the phaser effects.

Sally Helm: If a Trekker were to watch that pilot today... they wouldn't recognize much. Nearly all the characters end up being played by different actors. The key exception is Mr. Spock, the half-human, half-alien played by Leonard Nimoy. Spock's signature feature—his pointy ears—give the makeup department a whole lot of work before the pilot. They have to use new rubber tips every day, because they're gluing them right to Nimoy's ears and can't figure out a way to reuse them.

And when the network execs see their handiwork in the pilot?

David Goodman: They were very scared of the Mr. Spock character. They were worried that his satanic look with his pointed ears would scare off Bible belt viewers.

Sally Helm: They thought he was too demon-y, because his ears were pointy too much like a demon.

David Goodman: Right. Mm-hmm. The pilot goes over budget. And not a success with the network.

Sally Helm: Wait, so it's over budget and it flops.

David Goodman: It's over budget. They don't love it.

Sally Helm: The NBC execs think the episode is too heady. There's not enough action. And the casting is all wrong.

David Goodman: However, the one thing that the head of the network at NBC really liked about the pilot is he said, “I've seen a lot of science fiction. This is the first time I really felt I was on a spaceship.” And he really liked that. He really thought that was worth continuing to try to figure out this show.

Sally Helm: Wow. So, they got another chance.

David Goodman: They did a second pilot.

Sally Helm: Wow. That seems unusual.

David Goodman: It's happened, but it’s very unusual but he felt that there was something there.

Sally Helm: Wow. So, this is sort of like a, I don't know, maybe visionary is too strong, a word, but a high up exec who can kind of see it. Who's like, okay, it's not quite there, but it's gonna be there.
David Goodman: And that's, that's a really interesting thing too, talking about today's television, which is so driven by streamers and algorithms. This was an individual guy who got to make this decision based on his own gut and he was right. He was right. He was right.

Sally Helm: Pilot number two is called "Where No Man Has Gone Before." In it, the Star Trek world is beginning to look like the show you might know today. Down to the crew aboard a spaceship, the USS Enterprise.

Sally Helm: Let's start with Captain Kirk. Who is he?

David Goodman: So, in the creation of the captain Roddenberry wanted to create a character whose ancestors in the world of Star Trek came from the old west. This kind of character could fit in on, on any Western. And actually, you can see William Shatner the actor playing him on a lot of westerns in the sixties. So, he really did fit into that world. He's an American hero, but he was flawed. He could lose his temper and then admit he was wrong.

Kirk Archival: I look around that bridge and I see the men waiting for me to make the next move. And Bones, what if I'm wrong?

David Goodman: He could get scared. He was lonely.

Sally Helm: Okay. Dr. McCoy, tell me about him.

David Goodman: So, Dr. McCoy is the country doctor, he's not as comfortable with the technology of the future.

Spock Archival: Now there you have a museum piece doctor. Lens type, manually operated light activated—

McCoy Archival: Spare me the analysis Mr. Spock please, it’s enough that it works.

David Goodman: He's providing sort of a yin to Spock’s yang for Kirk.

Sally Helm: Spock. Kirk’s second in command. The controversial pointy eared demonic half-alien from the planet Vulcan. NBC had begged the creators to cut him.

David Goodman: But to the credit of the guys at Desilu and Roddenberry, they said, we’re not losing Spock.

Sally Helm: If anything, the second pilot gives Spock more importance. More depth.

David Goodman: They really got more into the backstory of Vulcans having this philosophy of logic. That to me is, beautiful in its inception, this idea of a world that follows logic, wouldn't that be nice here?
**Spock Archival:** Spock captain, I trust all has gone well?

**McCoy Archival:** Spock, are you alive?

**Spock Archival:** An illogical question doctor, since obviously you are hearing my voice.

**Michelle Sauer:** My favorite character was always Mr. Spock. Not because of the logical, although I suppose I have been accused of being pretty logical [laughs] being a professor.

**Sally Helm:** Michelle Sauer again.

**Michelle Sauer:** But, because he is, you know, half and half, half Vulcan, half human. And I, myself am mixed race, half and half equally. So, I, found that appealing.

**Sally Helm:** Like Kirk, Spock is complicated. He's trying to straddle two worlds: human and alien. And make sense of himself. As a mix of them both.

For a long time, Spock is the only Vulcan that the audience meets. To Goodman, that's part of what makes the character so amazing. He gestures at an entire unknown culture and makes us see it clearly.

**David Goodman:** We believe as an audience that there is a planet of these people. And it's all because of how this character is written and performed.

**Sally Helm:** The actors that fill out the rest of the cast are notably diverse.

**David Goodman:** And actually, that diversity was something that NBC was very happy about. I've read memos where they were really encouraging of that. They certainly understood that having a show that was more reflective of the population, brings you more audience.

**Sally Helm:** George Takei, a Japanese American actor, plays Sulu, a physicist aboard the ship. Nichelle Nichols, a Black woman who appeared in that controversial episode of Roddenberry’s first show, *The Lieutenant,* is playing a communications officer.

**Michelle Sauer:** She is a Black woman who was cast as a main character in a major television show. She wasn't a maid. She wasn't subservient, she wasn't anything like that. In fact, she was Black and served in an equal capacity as a star fleet officer with a crew that was more male than female.

**Uhura Archival:** I'm afraid you have it all wrong, Mr. Spock, all of you. I've been monitoring some of their old-style radio waves...

**Michelle Sauer:** That was a big deal in the sixties.
Sally Helm: After that second pilot, even with Spock’s pointy ears prominently featured...NBC gives the show the green light. The team has about six months to get everything together before the first episode premieres. David A. Goodman told us, the crew has their work cut out for them.

David Goodman: Creating a science fiction universe in the 1960s on a budget was difficult. And some things were more successful than others. There's an episode early on where, we're in sort of the botany room of the Enterprise and there's this plant that's making noise and it's very clear that the plant is a decorated glove hand and it's not very well done at all. It's terrible.

Sally Helm: Decorated like painted green?

David Goodman: It's sort of a flower and it's got pets and it's moving around. And initially when it's moving around, you can't tell what it is, but then there's a move that it makes. It's like, oh wait, that's a thumb. There's a creature in an episode where they're, they're testing the transporter and it's clearly a dog with like a plastic horn stuff, things for him. On the flip side of it, there's this episode involving a rock monster. and it was sort of a decorated, like rug, that was thrown over a guy and he moves across the floor. But it is so effective because of sound effects and the music that's added.

Rock Monster Archival: [vague grumble and dramatic music]

David Goodman: That it really looks pretty good, and it looks pretty scary.

Sally Helm: It's fun. It sounds like it would be fun to be in that room, sort of figuring out. Right. Okay. We have a rock monster. How do we do this?

David Goodman: How are we gonna do this? That to me is, it speaks to sort of the creativity of the artisans who were involved in making the show, is that they really cared about, and they really tried to do something good and believable.

Sally Helm: Just a month before the first episode is set to air, one of the show’s producers sends Roddenberry a memo telling him, “It is important that you compose, without delay, our Standard Opening Narration.” So, he sits down and comes up with that now-famous intro:

Archival: Space the final frontier.

Sally Helm: Roddenberry seems to be speaking right to his audience—a country wrapped up in the space race between the US and the Soviet Union.

David Goodman: And in fact, there's a private joke, in the opening of Star Trek.

Archival: Its five-year mission to explore strange new worlds

David Goodman: The Enterprise has a five-year mission. That's Roddenberry saying, I want this show to be on for five years, because if it goes in syndication, I'll be rich.
Sally Helm: On September 8, 1966, audiences see the first flight of the starship Enterprise. And pretty quickly, they like what they see. As did Michelle Sauer, watching the show years later.

Michelle Sauer: I did love it right away for having Spock be a hybrid character, just like me and having women in star fleet just like me.

Sally Helm: Sauer told us, that Black female officer, Lieutenant Uhura, is a particularly big deal. But apparently, at the end of the first season, Nichols, the actress who plays Uhura, is considering leaving the show. What she really wanted was to pursue a career on Broadway. So, she's weighing her options when one day, she's at a fundraiser, and she hears that a big fan wants to talk to her.

Michelle Sauer: And it turned out to be Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Sally Helm: Apparently Dr. King was a Trekkie. Or a Trekker.

David Goodman: Nichelle has told the press and I worked with her once and she told it to me, that he said to her, “You can't leave. You being there is a message to so many people out there that we're a part of the future.”

Michelle Sauer: “Don't you understand what you've achieved? In fact, this is the only TV show that Coretta and I allow our little children to stay up and watch. And it's all because of you. You have been chosen to show the world what we can do.” And I mean, she was stunned speechless.

David Goodman: And that obviously in the late sixties, that was a meaningful thing for her to hear. And she stayed with the show

Sally Helm: This isn't the first or last time Star Trek packs a punch beyond its galaxy. Space is endless, so you wouldn’t think there'd be boundaries. But Gene Rodenberry will keep finding them … and pushing them further.

[AD BREAK]

Sally Helm: From its inception, Star Trek tried to engage with social issues. Using that sneaky medieval technique of indirection, along with a diverse cast, and well-crafted scripts. According to one of the show's producers, they'd actually sometimes leave expletives in the scripts as low hanging fruit for Broadcast Standards to remove. So, they could keep more controversial subject matter.

In the show's third season, Nichelle Nichols, who stayed after her pep talk from Dr. King, stars in an episode with William Shatner, Captain Kirk. It goes down in TV history: it's called "Plato's Stepchildren."

Michelle Sauer: Plato’s Stepchildren is a fascinating episode. A lot of people would say it's not a very good episode. But it is famous for having the first interracial kiss on TV. Now, if we're gonna be absolutely real, it's not the first interracial kiss on TV.
Sally Helm: Michelle Sauer told us, Lucille Ball had kissed her Cuban husband, Desi, on TV. There had been other interracial kisses, too. Like one between Nancy Sinatra and Sammy Davis Jr. But:

Michelle Sauer: What makes it special is it's the first ever kiss between series regulars, these are characters you know and love, they're main characters. So, it is making a statement.

Sally Helm: And it’s an extra powerful statement because of the timing.

Michelle Sauer: It's being aired pretty much almost precisely a year after Loving vs. Virginia

Sally Helm: ‘Loving vs. Virginia’ is the Supreme Court decision that legalized interracial marriage. And to say the least, not every American is happy about that. So ‘the kiss’ might be seen by some viewers as a provocation. The writers know this … but they frame it in a way that somewhat softens the impact.

Michelle Sauer: Kirk and Uhura don't kiss because they want to, or because there's romantic attraction, rather they're under alien control.

Sally Helm: So just like those medieval writers who say, I'm just writing about a theoretical prince, not the actual ruler, the Star Trek writers can say, this isn't a Black woman and a white man kissing. It's aliens making these two bodies kiss. Even so:

Michelle Sauer: Some stations in the south at least originally refused to air it. Some of them, I guess, went to commercial early or something. But Nichols herself says that it was one of the episodes that got, the most fan mail.

Sally Helm: A few episodes later, the series tackles racism again, in an episode called "Let That Be Your Last Battlefield." It's pretty overt. Kirk meets two alien species that have been at war for centuries.

Michelle Sauer: At one point Kirk is like, “you're the same people. I don't understand. Nothing about you seems different to me.” And the response by the alien is, “well, I'm black on the right side and white on the left side and he is black, on the left side and white on the right side.”

Sally Helm: Other episodes in the original series cover economic inequality. Environmental pollution.

Sauer told us, they don’t all come down on the left-leaning side of an issue. For instance, there’s an episode called “A Private Little War.”

Kirk Archival: Do you remember the 20th century brush wars on the Asian continent?

Michelle Sauer: It’s a very clear connection to Vietnam.

Kirk Archival: The only solution is what happened back then.
Michelle Sauer: Roddenberry rewrites the script and turns *A Private Little War* from being a critique to a reluctant justification of the Vietnam war.

Sally Helm: Roddenberry is a complicated person. Much like the characters he created. He made women leaders on the Enterprise... but dressed them in little miniskirts. And though the show had an overt anti-bias message, Sauer told us, some bias snuck in there anyway. Take Spock, the half human half Vulcan.

Michelle Sauer: He calls himself the offensive term, half breed off and on throughout the series. There's a lot of bias that is tolerated in forms of teasing about his green bloodedness or his coldness, mocking his Vulcan heritage. So, there’s complicated relationships, right. There's all these messages of don't be bigoted, don't hate based on appearance. Don't start wars that, you know, are unnecessary, but there are disturbing undercurrents and I think it's just as complicated as real life.

Sally Helm: But the show’s goal of presenting an optimistic vision of a world without prejudice–that has outlived Roddenberry himself. The original series ends after three seasons. But the show has continued. In re-runs and re-makes. Prequels and sequels. Up to the present day.

Michelle Sauer: There are so many new Star Treks that respond to the current times. It grows and changes with the world. I think that is part at least of the reason that Star Trek can kind of always be there.

Sally Helm: In the '80s, when mental health becomes a prominent topic of conversation, there are characters who suffer from depression. In the '90s, a new female character makes the leap from supporting to leading role as captain of her own spaceship.

Michelle Sauer: And the latest iterations of the series have trans and non-binary characters and open gay relationships as they should, because our society is more open and accepting.

Sally Helm: The show's latest iteration, *Star Trek: Discovery*, even imagines a world in which Planet Earth could have a Black woman as president. She’s played by Georgia politician Stacey Abrams.

Abrams Archival: *United Earth is ready right now to rejoin the Federation.*

Sally Helm: And that optimistic world of Star Trek has spilled off the screen. In the ‘70s, actor Nichelle Nichols worked with NASA to recruit diverse groups of astronauts.

Nichols NASA Archival: *Now, the shuttle will be taking scientists and engineers, men and women of all races into space, just like the astronaut crew on the Starship Enterprise.*

Sally Helm: The year after her campaign, Sally Ride, the first American woman in space, and Guion Stewart Bluford Jr., the first Black American in space, apply and join the program. When Nichols dies at age 89 in July 2022, heartfelt tributes pour in from the many people she inspired.

And one Trekkie-slash-Trekker even makes it to the Oval Office. That would be President Barack Obama.
**Obama Archival:** It didn't matter that the special effects were kind of cheesy and bad. Right? [laughs]

*It was really talking about a, a notion of a common humanity and a confidence in our ability to solve problems.*

**Sally Helm:** For many people, like Sauer and Goodman, Star Trek isn't a phase. It's a lifelong love. I asked Goodman why it's stuck with him so long.

**Sally Helm:** Yeah, I mean, what was it? Can you describe it at all? I know it's just a feeling and sort of a, that's what love is, but what, like, yeah, if you could describe, like, what was it about it that [laughs]

**David Goodman:** I wanna know what love is? [laughs]

**Sally Helm:** That's my question.

**David Goodman:** I think that Star Trek is a wish fulfiller. It has subtle themes of acceptance, that the world is going to be better, that the most famous character on the show is an ultimate nerd and the jock is his best friend, that might have had an interest to me. But it's interesting too, that sort of gets lost in this discussion about Star Trek and the rabid Star Trek fans like me is that Star Trek was very popular with everybody. It was on seven nights a week in New York in the 1970s when I was growing up. That audience watching it was not just rabid Star Trek fans. It was a show that lots and lots and lots of people who didn't think about it after the hour was over really enjoyed because it was also really well-made entertainment. If you go and watch other television shows from the period, nothing comes close, in terms of the technical achievement. The writing, the depth of character, and like any great piece of fiction it created a world that the audience gets to have a communal experience sharing.

[CREDITS]

**Sally Helm:** Thanks for listening to History This Week. For more moments throughout history that are also worth watching, check your local TV listings to find out what's on the History Channel today.

If you want to get in touch, please shoot us an email at our email address, HistoryThisWeek@History.com, or you can leave us a voicemail: 212-351-0410.

Thanks to our guests today, David A. Goodman and Michelle Sauer. Goodman’s latest film, *Honor Society*, is now streaming on Paramount Plus. Sauer is the author of *Gender in Medieval Culture*.

This episode was produced by Julia Press. It was story edited by Jim O'Grady and sound designed by Brian Flood. HISTORY This Week is also produced by Morgan Givens and me, Sally Helm. Our associate producer is Emma Fredericks. Our intern is Francesca Mevs, who pitched us this episode! Our senior producer is Ben Dickstein. Our supervising producer is McCamey Lynn, and our executive producer is Jessie Katz.

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