



# STANDING THE TEST OF TIME

Unlike producer Irwin Allen's other sci-fi series, *The Time Tunnel* was axed after just one season. Yet it remains a much-loved and much copied TV show whose potential was never fully realised says Steve O'Brien

There are few things more frustrating for a TV viewer than witnessing a show that's cut down in its prime, of seeing a series that wasn't given the chance to grow, but which boasted a premise so much more unique than those around it. So it was with *The Time Tunnel*, a dazzling one-season wonder courtesy of uber-producer Irwin Allen, which was cruelly canned after just 30 episodes. Compare that to some of his other shows such as *Lost in Space* (83 episodes) and *Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea* (110 episodes) and it's clear that *The Time Tunnel* remains the great lost hope in the Allen cannon, a programme that, during its run on ABC between September 1966 and April 1967, won its creator rave reviews, if unspectacular ratings.

Irwin Allen was one of the brightest names in American TV in the Sixties, and was known as someone who could make a modestly budgeted show look like it cost a million bucks. Part of his skill

was knowing when to make use of stock footage. He'd already worked out how to make his small-screen version of *Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea* look strikingly cinematic, which was to re-use shots from his 1961 movie of the same name. And with *The Time Tunnel*, Allen had all of 20th Century Fox's film library at his disposal, meaning he could edit in stock footage of anything he liked, to punch up the look of the show. And he often didn't care whether the story written for it made sense, so long as it looked good. "Irwin had a favourite saying," *Time Tunnel* writer Bob Duncan recalled, "That was, 'Don't get logical with me!' There was absolutely no pressure on the writers to make the stories historically accurate."

Unlike TV's other time travel series of the Sixties, *Blighty's* own *Doctor Who*, *The Time Tunnel* didn't have an enigmatic alien as its lead. Instead, its protagonists were recognisably human in the shape of Tony Newman (James Darren) and Doug Phillips (Robert Colbert), two scientists who throw themselves into an experimental time machine after a penny-pinching government official threatens to close down the multi-billion-dollar project. Unable to return home, but able to communicate with their

colleagues back in Sixties Arizona, they're buffeted around the time stream, often at significant points in history, such as the sinking of the *Titanic* (in the series' opening episode), Pearl Harbor just before the attack by the Japanese and the Battle of Gettysburg. To keep costs down, more episodes were set in the past than the future, meaning less reliance on special effects or specially made costumes and sets. In fact, the show's historical bent was one of its defining characteristics. One of its stars, Lee Meriwether, has talked of how the cast received letters from school teachers who used the show to stimulate interest in history in the classroom.

*The Time Tunnel* debuted on September 9, 1966 and, though an advance screening at the World Science Fiction Convention in Ohio went down badly (hardcore sci-fi fans are notoriously hard to please), press reaction to the series was uncharacteristically – for Irwin Allen at least – positive.

"This elaborately wrought and well-scripted (albeit trickily) show should give a good account for itself," wrote industry bible *Variety*, while *Christian Science Monitor* compared the series favourably to NBC's rival science fiction show.



James Darren and Robert Colbert (left). Lee Meriwether as Dr MacGregor (above)



DID YOU KNOW?

The opening and closing theme music was written by legendary composer John Williams under the name Johnny Williams.

"Both *Time Tunnel* and *Star Trek*," they wrote, "have dizzyingly intricate machinery that contributes to their impact."

THE SPICE OF LIFE

The joy of *The Time Tunnel* was that, unlike Allen's more static *Lost in Space*, audiences never knew what they were going to get with each new episode. One week, it could be set on the island of Krakatoa

in 1883, the next, 13th Century BC at the time of the Trojan War. Like *Doctor Who*, it was a series capable of reinventing itself with every episode, giving fans a completely different story, in a different setting, each week.

But if fans were lapping up *The Time Tunnel*, more casual viewers were turning off, and the show became the only one of Irwin Allen's series to be axed after just one season. The series screened its final episode, *Town of Terror*, on April 7, 1967.

"Had *The Time Tunnel* gone a second season, the possibilities would have been expanded," actor James Darren remarked. "We could have gone into a parallel world. We could have bumped into ourselves from another travel. The possibilities were limitless."

A remake was announced by Fox in 2002, but never made it past the pilot stage. Time will tell (quite literally) whether we'll ever revisit the story of Tony Newman and Doug Phillips, but certainly while it's never been formally remade or rebooted, there are traces of *The Time Tunnel* in countless SF series that have been made since, from *Sliders* (1995-2000) or *Quantum Leap* (1989-93) to *Timeless* (2016-18) or *Journeymen* (2007). Despite its short life, *The Time Tunnel* is a series that has an influence far greater than its reputation as a one-season wonder suggests.