

Iconic duo were STREETS AHEAD

Steve O'Brien recalls *The Streets of San Francisco*, and discovers the unique bond between its two stars that helped it become one of the Seventies' most successful TV crime shows

Both Karl Malden and Michael Douglas spent time with SFPD detectives so they could lend an air of authenticity to the show

DID YOU KNOW?

Edward Hume, who helped develop the series, went on to write 1983's *The Day After*, the record-breaking (it's still the highest-rated television film in history) nuclear war drama.

In the early Seventies, filmmakers were on intimate terms with the city of San Francisco through a succession of hard-boiled thrillers and action movies such as *Point Blank* (1967), *Bullitt* (1968), *Dirty Harry* (1971) and *The Conversation* (1974). Its iconic vertiginous streets seemed custom-built for the genre, giving car chases extra cinematic oomph as audiences watched Ford Mustangs speed into mid-air and screech through its wide streets. It seemed only a matter of time before a TV series set up camp there and made the Golden Gate City as much of a character as its leads. Enter *The Streets of San Francisco*.

Quinn Martin was, in 1971, one of television's most in-demand producers, a man whose brand was so ubiquitous that his programmes carried a 'A Quinn Martin Production' caption and voiceover. As the brains behind *The Fugitive*, *The Invaders*, *Cannon* and *The FBI*, he seemingly had the Midas touch. A Quinn Martin production set in Frisco seemed as sure-fire a hit as you can get in TV-land.

Martin found his inspiration in a 1971 novel, *Poor, Poor Ophelia* by the author Carolyn Weston. The book told the story of a couple of mismatched San Fran cops – homicide detective Al Krug and

his partner, university-educated ex-surfer Casey Kellogg – who find themselves investigating a gruesome murder after a woman's corpse is found floating in the bay.

Edward Hume, who had worked with Martin on the detective show *Cannon*, was tasked with developing Weston's novel into a series. Al Krug became police veteran Detective Lieutenant Mike Stone and Casey Kellogg was refashioned as Inspector Steve Keller, a 28-year-old college graduate who finds a father figure in his gruff 60-something partner.

LEVEL PEGGING

Karl Malden was cast in the older role. An Academy Award winner (for his role as Blanche DuBois' lover Mitch in the 1952 film version of *A Streetcar Named Desire*), Malden was equally at home playing heavies (his twice-broken nose, which gave him the appearance of a beaten-up boxer, certainly helped) and good guys. His role as Mike Stone would earn him four nominations – between 1974 and 1977 – for a Primetime Emmy Award for Outstanding Lead Actor in a Drama Series.

For audiences, Malden was a safe pair of hands, a face they'd known from the big screen for more than 20 years. Less familiar was his co-star, Michael Douglas. He may have

been born of Hollywood royalty (the son of the Oscar-winner Kirk Douglas), but he was still relatively unknown when he was cast as the fresh-out-of-college Steve Keller.

Aged just 28, Douglas formed a close bond with the 60-year-old Malden, who would refer to his fresh-faced co-star as "the son I never had".

"He was the lead, and back in those days, when filming, the second lead was usually about 2ft back from the lead, filmed in soft focus," Douglas recalled to the *Emmys* website in 2022. "The focus couldn't hold both. But Karl looked at me and said, 'Hey, Buddy, come up here. You take the front.' Very early on, he realised that just because he was number one on the call sheet, that didn't mean he always had to be in the number one position on camera. He was very comfortable allowing me to take the front spot once in a while."

SPECIAL CHEMISTRY

The Streets of San Francisco was an immediate success, initially screening on Saturday nights. It later moved to Thursdays where it stayed for the rest of its run.

Douglas stayed with the show for four seasons, before leaving to produce the big screen version of Ken Kesey's novel, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975) – Douglas' father Kirk had purchased the film rights in the Sixties, before selling them on to his son.

"Streets was a big hit show," Douglas said. "Everybody thought I was nuts. They asked, 'You're going to leave a big hit show?' And I said, 'I really want to do this.'"

In his place, Quinn cast 31-year-old Richard Hatch, an actor who'd chalked up various guest turns on other Quinn Martin productions, including *Barnaby Rudge* and *Cannon*. Debuting in

the 1976 episode *The Thrill Killers*, Inspector Dan Robbins was of a similar age to Keller but was a beat cop who'd risen up the ranks.

"I was terrified going into a primetime show with Karl Malden and I felt this intense pressure – it was terrifying," Hatch recalled. "It was hard because Michael Douglas was like a second son to Karl Malden, who was respectful to me, but never warm and welcoming like Lorne Greene on *Battlestar Galactica*. Even my girlfriend at the time liked Michael Douglas and missed the Steve Keller character."

Sadly, audiences were of the same mind as Hatch's girlfriend and the Dan Robbins character was never embraced in the way that Steve Keller had been. Ratings nosedived for the show's fifth season and the programme bowed out on June 9, 1977 with the episode *The Canine Collar*.

However, that wasn't quite the end for *The Streets of San Francisco*. In 1992, the show returned for a one-off special titled *Back to the Streets of San Francisco*. Karl Malden was back, newly promoted to Captain of

Inspectors, this time investigating the murder of his old partner, Steve Keller. Douglas turned down the chance to return (by this time he was one of Hollywood's most in-demand actors), though he could be glimpsed in flashbacks, while the episode ignored the Dan Robbins' character altogether. 18.9 million viewers tuned in.

More than half a century on from its debut, *The Streets of San Francisco* feels more of a kind with gritty, urban cop flicks such as *The French Connection* and *Dirty Harry* as it does TV procedurals of the time. Few programmes of the Seventies relied as much on location work as *The Streets of San Francisco* and even Douglas admitted years later that he considered each episode, "a 52-minute film that was shot in seven days."

And that no-one has, as yet, mounted a remake of *The Streets of San Francisco* only goes to show how irreplaceable Karl Malden and Michael Douglas were in the roles of Mike Stone and Steve Keller, one of TV's most memorable and iconic partnerships.



Richard Hatch replaced Douglas but a decline in viewership, coupled with rising production costs, prompted ABC to cancel the series



Stars who guested in the series include Arnold Schwarzenegger, Mark Hamill, Leslie Nielsen, Tom Selleck, Martin Sheen and Carl Weathers.