

Launched in 1967, *The Invaders* was a sci-fi TV show like no other, a small-screen thriller that was more *The Fugitive* than *Star Trek*, says Steve O'Brien

# Invasion EARTH

**T**he *Fugitive* was one of the most popular TV shows of the Sixties, and a jewel in the crown of its producer, Quinn Martin. Its protagonist was Richard Kimble, wrongly accused of his wife's murder, who finds himself on the run, searching for the man responsible. It was a brilliant set-up, taking Kimble to a different locale each week as he tries to piece together the puzzle of what really happened that fateful night and convince the world of his innocence. So when *The Invaders* debuted on ABC mid-way through *The Fugitive*'s final season in January 1967, there was something strangely familiar about the premise. Playing like a mash-up of *The Fugitive* and *Invasion*

Roy Thinnes played David Vincent, an architect who witnesses the arrival of aliens on Earth

of the *Body Snatchers* (1956) and with a dash of Alfred Hitchcock, *The Invaders* would become another Quinn Martin success, telling the story of architect David Vincent, who, after discovering that the Earth is being invaded by aliens with the power to disguise themselves as human, tries to convince an unsuspecting world of the extra-terrestrials among us and their nefarious plan.

"Of course *The Invaders* was definitely in the same genre as *The Fugitive*: a man moving across America, in search of something, and in jeopardy," said the show's creator Larry Cohen who'd penned episodes of *The Fugitive* for Martin, adding that the films of the *Master of Suspense* also fed into the show: "I always liked the Hitchcock movie where the hero is in a situation where he's the only one that knows the spies are operating, and no one will believe him. And when he takes the police back to the locale where he saw their operation, everything has been removed, there's no more evidence, everybody lies and says that he was never there before."

#### SUBLIMINAL MESSAGE

Unlike *Star Trek*, *The Invaders* didn't present its audience with bug-eyed monsters or head-scrambling science-fiction concepts. This wasn't sci-fi for those raised on the esoteric fiction of Arthur C. Clarke or Richard Matheson. *The Invaders*' aliens looked exactly like humans (or at least they did in the show), save for a few tell-tale signs – they don't have a pulse or bleed and have a deformed fourth finger. And in David Vincent, Cohen created the ultimate Hitchcockian everyman. In some ways, it didn't matter what it was that Vincent was trying to convince the world of – the drama came out of the fact that he alone knows the truth. We never even discovered much about the aliens over the course of the 43 episodes, with Cohen leaving their origins – liberally and tantalisingly blank. We never learned about the ET's

home world, the name of their species, or what they really looked like. *The Invaders*, then, was a sci-fi show for those who didn't like sci-fi. And just as one of the series' primary influences, Don Siegel's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, had been an allegory of the Communist witch-hunts of the Fifties, Cohen intended *The Invaders*, too, to have a subliminal socio-political message.

"*The Invaders* to me was a way of doing a show about the Communist paranoia that the industry was just emerging from at the time," Cohen, who died in 2019, told journalist Stephen Bowie. "I thought, well, this is an interesting thing if we can take this paranoia and put it on the television screen and sell it to the television networks without them even knowing what they're buying."

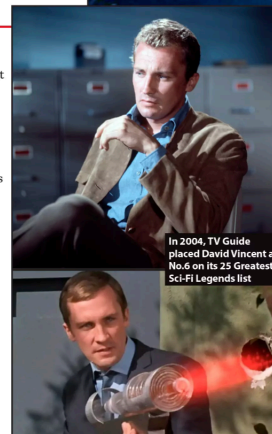
*The Invaders* premiered on January 10, 1967 with the episode *Beachhead*. Over the next 16 weeks audiences would witness our embattled hero attempting to thwart the alien invasion and trying to convince the authorities of the infiltration, a task made more difficult due to the aliens' bodies disintegrating after they died, eliminating evidence of their existence.

Though *The Invaders*' first season didn't quite scale the ratings heights of *The Fugitive*, ABC had enough faith in the show to commission a second series, this time with an increased episode count. Its 26 episodes, however, only worked to highlight the limitations of the show's format. After two seasons, David Vincent had hardly got anywhere in exposing the invasion, and we'd learned little

more about our hero and his extra-terrestrial foes than we already knew at the beginning.

With ratings sagging, ABC swung the axe, but sadly before Cohen had a chance to wrap up the story. *The Fugitive* had climaxed on August 29, 1967 with an episode that tied up all the loose ends, while winning the network one of the biggest audiences in television history. *The Invaders*' story, by contrast, was never concluded satisfactorily. By the time of the show's closing episode, even those who worked on the series were happy to see it put down.

"It kind of became a downhill spiral," reflected producer Alan Armer. "It just got sillier and sillier." That final episode, *Inquisition*,



In 2004, TV Guide placed David Vincent at No.6 on its 25 Greatest Sci-Fi Legends list



Thinnes returned in 1995 as a much older David Vincent, as part of the TV mini-series (starring Scott Bakula), and a decade later provided audio commentary for the official DVD releases of *The Invaders*

wasn't quite the end of *The Invaders*, however – 27 years later, Fox screened a limited series that continued *The Invaders*' narrative. Scott Bakula starred as a former Air Force officer named Nolan Wood who finds himself taken over by the invading aliens.

#### SETTING THE STANDARD

Despite a cameo turn from Roy Thinnes as a now 50-something David Vincent, this two-part miniseries failed to win over fans of the original (Larry Cohen had nothing to do with it) and it attracted dismal reviews.

"It was clear that they didn't have a clue about what *The Invaders* was about," reflected Roy Thinnes. "I did the appearance thinking it

might have a life and gather some interest... I don't have a lot to say about it, because I thought it was a silly attempt."

*The Invaders* miniseries had been greenlit off the back of the success of *The X-Files*, a massively popular TV show that creator Chris Carter has admitted was heavily influenced by *The Invaders*. And in 1996, Carter paid tribute to the series by casting Roy Thinnes as a mysterious extra-terrestrial who has the power to heal with his touch.

Through the Nineties, rumours were rife that *The Invaders* would be adapted into a feature film. After all, the big screen version of *The*

*Fugitive* had been the second highest grossing movie of 1993 and so what of Quinn Martin's other man-on-the-run drama? However, despite rumblings that *Die Hard* producer Joel Silver was behind a planned revival, *The Invaders* movie never materialised.

Even though it's not as acclaimed as *The Fugitive*, *The Invaders*' influence looms large on much of the small-screen sci-fi that came after it. From *The X-Files* to *V* to *Invasion* to *Falling Skies*, it's clear the sci-fi landscape would be a very different place without *The Invaders* and the story of David Vincent.

**DID YOU KNOW?**

The series' pilot, *Beachhead*, formed the basis for an episode of Quinn Martin's *Tales of the Unexpected* in 1977, where it was retitled *The Nomad*.