

# The Green Hornet



## Bruce Lee's big break

Created to complement ABC TV's other superhero show *Batman* in the mid-Sixties, *The Green Hornet* would introduce American audiences to one of the biggest stars of the following decade, Bruce Lee...



There's a scene in Quentin Tarantino's 2019 movie *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood*, where we see kung fu legend Bruce Lee on the set of an American TV show, challenging Brad Pitt's stuntman character to a fight, one that he spectacularly loses when Pitt flings him into a side of a car. Though the incident didn't happen in real life, it was, the director claims, based on Lee's actual behaviour on one of 1966's standout TV shows. "The stuntmen hated Bruce on *The Green Hornet*," Tarantino said. "Bruce had nothing but disrespect for American stuntmen and was always hitting them. He was always tagging them with his feet and his fists and it got to the point where they refused to work with him."

Though the scene riled Lee's surviving family and many of his fans, it did remind audiences that the biggest Asian movie star of the Seventies started his career on TV, on a superhero show based

on one of American radio's most popular characters.

### MASKED VIGILANTE

The *Green Hornet* wasn't, like *Batman*, from one of the big comic stables. He wasn't a DC or Marvel creation, instead debuting on Detroit radio station WXYZ in 1936. Running until 1952, the series told the story of Britt Reid, wealthy media mogul by day, masked vigilante by night, accompanied by his crime-fighting partner Kato. Wildly successful in its time it was, according to American radio scholar John Dunning, "one of radio's best-known and most distinctive juvenile adventure shows".

The character's co-creator (alongside Fran Striker) George W. Trendle had been trying to get a *Green Hornet* TV series off the ground since the Fifties, but it wasn't until the runaway success of ABC's *Batman* (1966-68) that television executives started looking around for other

Holy Smokes! The Caped Crusaders meet *The Green Hornet* and Kato



### DID YOU KNOW?

Before his TV debut, *The Green Hornet* had appeared on the silver screen in two Universal serials – *The Green Hornet* and *The Green Hornet Strikes Again* (both 1940)

Van Williams came out of retirement in 1993 for the movie *Dragon: The Bruce Lee Story* in which he played a director on *The Green Hornet* TV show



Kung fu master Bruce Lee brought a new dimension to Kato with his high kicks



Van Williams said Bruce Lee had the determination to achieve his dreams

superhero characters to mine for the small screen. Debuting on ABC in September 1966, *The Green Hornet* shared a producer with *Batman*, William Dozier, who initially wanted to replicate that show's campy, arch tone. Only the terms under which ABC acquired the rights gave Trendle more control than *Batman* creator Bob Kane had been allowed on the sister series, and he wasn't keen for this series to send up the character he'd helped create 30 years before.

### GETTING SERIOUS

So, despite the various similarities (Dozier narrated both) and the continuity between the two shows (Dozier had *The Green Hornet* and Kato came in *Batman*, and had the Caped Crusader and Robin guest in *The Green Hornet*), one was decidedly more comedic than the other. While *Batman* fought such cartoonish adversaries as *The Joker*, *Catwoman*, *The Riddler* and *The Penguin*, *The Green Hornet* would instead take on such real-life

threats as the Mafia, Chinese Triads, drug dealers, and local mobsters.

Yet for all their shared DNA, *The Green Hornet* never took off in the way that *Batman* had. One reason was possibly its less jocular tone. Audiences appeared to embrace superhero fare if it affectionately mocked the genre, but were less sure about something that took the choice of *Van Williams* as Britt Reid/*The Green Hornet*. Adam West's lightness of touch as an actor was a big part of *Batman*'s appeal, but Williams would prove a less charismatic lead. Instead it was his co-star that would become the show's breakout star.

Lee was already a known name in martial arts circles when he was cast as Britt Reid's valet-cum-kung-fu-fighting partner, Kato. Yet the Kato of the radio version had simply used his fists in fights – it was Lee who encouraged the programme makers to make use of his world-class martial arts skills.

"He would jump up and tap you on the ear with his foot," Van Williams recalled in the documentary *Bruce Lee: The Martial Arts Master*, about how Lee would run around the set practising his kicks. "But this stopped when one of the extras turned around and got his jaw dislocated!"

Aside from Lee and Williams, there was another star of the show, in the shape of a 1966 Chrysler Imperial. Just as *Batman* had his Batmobile, *The Green Hornet* had his *Black Beauty*, a sleek, ebony-hued automobile festooned with accessories such as knock-out gas, infra-red night vision headlights and rear rockets straight out of the James Bond handbook. *The Green Hornet* may not have had the wallet-busting budget of a 007 film, but in 1966/67, Britt Reid's weapons-laden car was every bit as desirable as Bond's Aston Martin DB5.

Then there was that theme tune. *Flight of the Bumblebee* wasn't written specially for the series, having been composed by Russian

Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov in 1900, but this jazzy interpretation of it (by arranger Billy May) would become one of the most iconic themes of the Sixties. In 2003, Quentin Tarantino would use the piece in his movie *Kill Bill*, Vol. 1, in the fight scene between 'the Bride' and the sword-wielding members of 'The Crazy 88' (who, in another nod to the series, are all wearing Kato-style masks).

### LEE'S LEGACY

ABC had hoped with *The Green Hornet* that we were getting another *Batman*, but it failed to connect with audiences in quite the same way. That, plus the fact that Dozier was repeatedly failing to keep the series on budget eventually forced the network to pull the plug after just 26 episodes.

While Van Williams never became the star that *The Green Hornet* promised, for Bruce Lee it would prove a starring turn. He opened up a kung fu school in LA, teaching actors such as Steve McQueen and James Coburn, and

would later headline some of the biggest action flicks of the Seventies including *Fist of Fury* (1972) and *Enter the Dragon* (1973).

While *The Green Hornet* never caught fire culturally like his Caped Crusader cousin, a movie version did materialise in 2011. However, while the series had eschewed the farcical tone of the *Batman* TV show, this Michel Gondry-directing, Seth Rogan-starring feature film was only a modest hit, however, and the planned sequel never came to be.

Yet rarely a year goes by without some news story announcing plans for another reboot, with the latest being that *Invisible Man* (2020) director Leigh Whannell is to helm a new big screen version of *The Green Hornet*, from a script by *Jurassic Park*'s David Koepp. Yet even if this next iteration becomes the biggest movie ever, its makers need to know that they owe a huge debt to Williams Dozier, Bruce Lee and Van Williams for keeping that *Green Hornet* flame alive in the Sixties.