

Route 66 on Television: Cool Corvettes and Characters

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If you wanna know why Americans love their Vettes, you gotta wrap your ass in fiberglass, then you'll know. – Judy H., Corvette Funfest, Effingham, Ill., 1999

“They don't write songs about Volvos.” – quote on a GM Corvette poster

“Get your motor runnin, head out on the highway, lookin' for adventure...”

- Steppenwolf

[Author's note: expect recollections concerning the contributions, cities, and sights of Route 66 during its heyday to “rev up” during the next few years; its 100th anniversary will be celebrated in 2026. In fact, in late 2020 Congress passed a law establishing the U.S. Route 66 Centennial Commission to oversee the celebration.]

Part 1

Introduction

From October 1960 until March 1964, each Friday night many Americans tuned in their television sets to watch their favorite programs such as The Andy Griffith Show, The Beverly Hillbillies, Candid Camera Gunsmoke, Wagon Train, and Rawhide. But at the same time, millions of people opted instead to watch an hour-long show, “Route 66,” because for them there was nothing cooler than seeing the two 20-something guys setting out in their slick Corvette convertible in search of adventure. The two worked odd jobs, met colorful characters (with a variety of accents, livelihoods, ethnicities, and often moody, dark personalities), and got involved in one situation after another (such as those revolving around a heroin addict, a runaway, a Nazi hunter, a dying jazz singer, migrant farm workers and so on). both romantic and dangerous. During that span the program aired on CBS for 116 episodes and the production caravan had filmed in 81 communities in 25 states.

[NOTE: dozens of Route 66 TV episodes may be found – and watched; Google: TV Guide route 66 episodes list/. Also, a complete list of episodes, both titles and descriptions, is available at Wikipedia (Google: List of Route 66 episodes).]



Photo credit: TV Insider

The Show's Actors and Premise

The show's two main stars were George Maharis (who played Buz Murdock, described as a survivor of New York's tough streets) and Martin Milner (playing Tod Stiles, a privileged but nearly broke, clean-cut, college-educated guy. Maharis (Buz) was felt by many to be the more interesting character of the two, being streetwise as opposed to Milner's mostly brash role. Maharis' scripts were usually more entertaining and occasionally tackled controversial topics such as racism in the South and union busting up north for instance.

- Maharis was born in Queens, NY in Sept. 1928 to Greek immigrants and left high school early to join the Marine Corps. In the mid-1950s he began to appear in plays and on television and soon acquired a tough-guy image like that of Humphrey Bogart. He began working on Route 66 in 1960 and received an Emmy nomination for Outstanding Lead Actor in a Series in 1962 (the character of Buz resembled a young Jack Kerouac so closely in his 1957 book, *On the Road* (which had two guys "On the Road" in a 1949 Hudson) that Kerouac threatened a lawsuit). After leaving the program Maharis went on to appear in made-for-tv movies well into the 1980s. He enjoyed some success as a singer both early and later in his career, making several albums and singles. He died from hepatitis in Beverly Hills in May 2023, at the age of 94; he never married.
- Milner, born in Detroit in December 1931, had realized acting success long before Route 66, beginning in movies as a teen and first appearing in the 1947 film "Life with Father" (with such stars as Elizabeth Taylor, William Powell, and Irene Dunne). He later gained added fame as a jazz guitarist in "Sweet Smell of Success" (1957) and "Valley of the Dolls" (1967). But it was Route 66 that established his career. After leaving that program, he starred in NBC's "Adam-

12" from 1968-75, and also appeared on "Fantasy Island," "MacGyver," "Murder, She Wrote," "Diagnosis Murder," and other TV shows, as well as movies with John Wayne ("Sands of Iwo Jima," "Operation Pacific") and Richard Widmark ("Halls of Montezuma"). Milner, married to the same woman for 58 years, died of heart failure at his home in Carlsbad, CA, in Sept. 2015 at age 83.



Photo credit: The Mother Road



April 1962

Tod (Milner) was always seen as the driver of the Corvette, so viewers understood that it belonged to him. But how could he (or most people in that timeframe) afford it? The base price for a 1960 Corvette convertible was a whopping \$3,872 (an optional heater added \$102, an AM radio cost \$137.75, and windshield washers, \$16.15, were in addition to this base amount). The story line was that Tod, the clean-cut, college-educated kid, was given a new Corvette by his father. Conversely, Buz worked as a laborer in Tod's dad's shipping business in New York, where the two met while working in summers.

When Tod's dad died of a heart attack, he inherited his dad's new Corvette as well as a failed business. That's when Tod and Buz decided to drive the open road to learn about the country and themselves. [Side note: The show was initially intended to be called "The Searchers," but that title was discarded because of a movie having the same name.]

The Cars

For many people, the “third character,” and even the true star of the program, was the Corvette always seen as the two actors (supposedly) drove on Route 66 in each episode. In fact, it was no accident that the year the show debuted, 1960, was the first year that Corvette sales were over 10,000 units (almost 600 more units built than in 1959). The head of production decided the show would need to use three to four cars each season. In fact, about every 3,000 miles, the Corvette seen on the show would be replaced with a new one. This approach kept the cars looking as new and fresh as possible. And because Chevrolet was one of the show’s sponsors, GM wanted their star car to look as new and nice as possible.

Of course, given the filming schedule and changes of venues, it is possible that the cars simply needed to be replaced. The episodes were uniquely shot on location, which meant they were driven long distances and sometimes filmed in backwoods areas that could mean rough terrain. (As hinted earlier, the majority of episodes were filmed away from Route 66, in 81 communities across 25 states.) Occasionally, the characters themselves got the Corvette into some difficulty, such as in one episode in which an angry man driving an earthmoving truck dumped a pile of dirt on the hood of the Corvette.)

The Corvettes in the program were neither red nor black, although both red and black models were used in some of the show’s promotional ads. The show was always filmed in black-and-white, so vehicle colors were important in order to give the car scenes the appropriate lighting. Therefore, the Corvettes had to have colors that were neutral so as not to reflect too much light. George Maharis (Buz) put it this way: “It was light blue in the pilot and early episodes, and then it was beige for the run of the series. When they used the beige Corvette, that color absorbed more light and cast less reflection.”

The “light blue” color Maharis referred to for early episodes was Horizon Blue (only 766 such units were built in 1960 of 10,261 total). The 1960 model only appeared in the pilot episode.



Horizon Blue. Photo credit: CorvSport

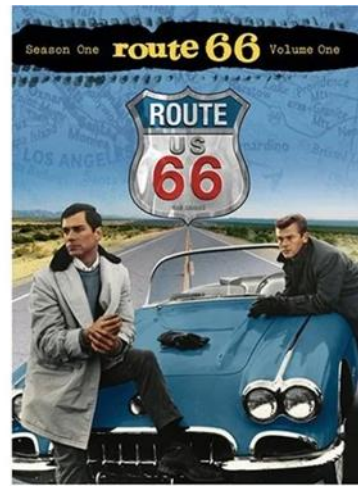


Photo credit: Amazon

In the 1961 and 1962 seasons, as Maharis suggested, the Corvette was primarily Fawn Beige. Cascade Green cars (a color produced in 1957 and 1960) were also used in some episodes.

Cascade Green



Photo credit: CorvSport

The 1963 Corvette Sting Ray became available in dealerships at the end of September 1962. Therefore, in the middle of the third season (in about January 1963) and in Season 4, beginning in January 1963, the actors drove a 1963 Saddle Tan Corvette, marking the first use of a C2 Corvette (photo below; no unit nos. for that color are available for that model year).



Photo credit: Corvette Forum

Finally, although some sources indicate that a 1964 model was used on the program for a brief time, no photos or substantiating information can be found to verify that claim; in fact, other sources state that the above shown Saddle Tan 1963 model “finished out the series.”

Next, in Part 2: the theme song, miscellaneous facts, a new passenger for “Tod,” the show on disc and in literature