

# Life on a two-lane blacktop

James Wilder and Dan Cortese dust off  
the old Corvette in the retooled 'Route 66'

BY SALLY OGLE DAVIS

**H**ollywood has never been shy about recycling past successes, usually with diminishing returns. But what was once a gentle ripple is now threatening to become a tidal wave—witness upcoming second-time-around projects for the big-screen like *An Affair to Remember* with Warren Beatty and Annette Bening, *The Fugitive* with Harrison Ford, *The Getaway* with Kim Basinger and Alec Baldwin, and *Maverick* with Mel Gibson.

On the home screen, we can look forward (or not, depending on your point of view) to TV movie versions of *The Odd Couple*, *Hart to Hart* and *I Spy* along with more retreads of *Gunsmoke* and *Ironside*. **Tuesday, NBC** hits the road with a “new” series, *Route 66*. It’s custom-designed for aficionados of the early ’60s—before Vietnam, protest movements and long hair changed the heart of North America.

It’s been 33 years since Martin Milner and George Maharis first leapt into a Corvette and headed cross country on “the mother road” in a Kerouacian journey of self-discovery. Not only has the road, once known as “the backbone of America,” been supplanted by eight-lane freeways, but the towns along the way, whose characters were the lifeblood of the original series, were forgotten long years ago by harried motorists too busy to stop.

So what, you may well ask, remains to make a series about?

The producers say it’s a show for everyone who has wants to travel, has travelled, and plans to keep travelling. “It’s kind of the mother of all concepts,” sums up Harley Peyton, *Route 66*’s co-executive producer who won an Emmy

for his writing on *Twin Peaks*.

In an effort to provide his concept with some continuity, Peyton has cast James Wilder (*Equal Justice*) as the son of the character played by Milner in the original. The plot has him inheriting his dad’s old Corvette and heading down what is left of that symbolic highway. Along the way, he picks up a hitchhiker, played by Dan Cortese, who becomes his partner in adventure.

Wilder is well cast as a free spirit: his own coming-of-age rituals were every bit as exotic as driving through the heartland in a priceless classic car. In his early teens, he dropped out of school in San Francisco, moved to Paris and turned to fire eating, chainsaw juggling and tightrope walking at the Lido and the Moulin Rouge. To him, *Route 66* is not even a name from the past.

“I’ve never seen it,” he laughs. “I wasn’t even born then. But my dad tells me a lot about it.”

Cortese, who is from Sewickley, Penn., headed west on Interstate 40 two years ago with \$1,000 in his pocket to “become a movie star.” He moved from working the door of a club to being a “gofer” at MTV, the music network. Luck and self-confidence nabbed him an on-camera job on the network’s sports show, as well as appearances in more than 80 Burger King commercials. *Route 66* gives him a chance to show he has other talents.

“We meet up with women who make us look like fools; we save people from a speeding train; we deal with an insane alcoholic,” says Cortese.

And if modern audiences buy that, Cortese has just one little concern about the mega-horsepowered vehicle he rides around in: “I just hope the car doesn’t upstage the actors.”



WILDER (TOP); CORTESE:  
WELL CAST AS FREE SPIRITS