

**GOING BOLDLY**  
ENGINEER  
PAUL STAMETS  
(ANTHONY RAPP)  
AND DR HUGH  
CULBER (WILSON  
CRUZ) IN *STAR  
TREK: DISCOVERY*.

# IT'S IN THE STARS

**SELF-CONFESSED TREKKIE, XAV JUDD, CHEERS ON THE GAY CHARACTERS WHO HAVE FINALLY MADE IT INTO THE STAR TREK FRANCHISE, AND LOOKS AT THE SHOW'S REFLECTION OF IDENTITY POLITICS.**

**IN THE 1960S**, Texan-born TV producer and scriptwriter Gene Rodenberry changed American culture forever with a simple idea: *Star Trek*. The revolutionary science fiction series, set in the 23rd century, depicted the adventures of the starship *Enterprise* and its crew as they boldly went where “no man” had gone before. Out in space and, occasionally, on Earth in a different timeframe, the characters encountered “strange new worlds” and battled an assortment of weird aliens and other dubious humans – albeit with a high-minded colonial attitude. *Star Trek* was as ground breaking in the US as *Dr Who* was in the UK. Nonetheless, in 1969, after only three seasons, the show was jettisoned, cancelled by NBC due to low ratings.

Then, by a miracle almost as impressive as travelling at warp speed, *Star Trek* became a revered cult classic. Through the wonders of syndication, *Star Trek* repeats began screening nightly across the US and the show finally attracted a huge following, particularly on college campuses.

Ten years later, following the surprise success of

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*Star Wars*, the franchise was resurrected. Initially, the original cast were called upon in a succession of big-budget movies, starting with the eponymous *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* (1979). As the momentum of fandom grew, further TV series were developed, creating a broader imaginary universe with action taking place in different eras and locations, and with completely new casts: *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, *Star Trek: Voyager*, and *Star Trek: Enterprise*.

The big-budget movie reboots continue. A trio of features in which Chris Pine plays Captain Kirk and Zachary Quinto is his second-in-command, Spock, have thrilled fans but not quite kept them sated. Invariably there's a three or four-year hiatus between each release. Thank goodness then, for Trekkie tragics like me, there's NBC's current nine-episode iteration *Star Trek: Discovery*, set approximately a decade before the original series, which explores the Federation-Klingon war.

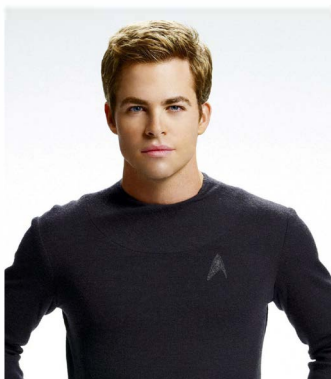
Uniquely, it's the first show in this Rodenberry-created cosmos to have an openly gay lead character, Chief Engineer Paul Stamets, played by Anthony Rapp. (Although, in the latest movie, *Star Trek: Beyond* in 2016, which operates along a different timeline, we learned that helmsman Sulu (John Cho) isn't straight. George Takei, who played the character originally and is gay, wasn't particularly happy about the change.)

If any major sci-fi franchise was going to incorporate an LGBT main character, it's this. It fits Rodenberry's initial vision. Having lived through the horror and devastation of World War II as a pilot on combat missions, he was determined to create a show that depicted a more progressive, brighter future for humanity. Ergo, in the first series of *Star Trek*, not only is Earth at peace, it's teamed up with over 150 civilised planets to form The Federation, an idealised version of the United Nations founded on utopian principles of universal liberty, rights and equality. In *Star Trek*, homo sapiens champion diversity. Consequently, a Russian character Pavel Chekov (Walter Koenig), plays an important role aboard the *Enterprise*, even though at the time of production the United States was in the throes of the Cold War with the Soviet Union. Even more significantly, there was a black, female crew member with a substantial role, Communications Officer, Lieutenant Uhura (played by Nichelle Nichols). This was during one of the bitterest times of modern race-relations in the US: civil rights leader Martin Luther King was assassinated in 1968; in the mid-'60s the Ku Klux Klan were still lynching Africa-Americans, burning down churches that supported civil rights and murdering white campaigners.

Rodenberry also made his point in individual episodes. *Plato's Stepchildren* (1968) featured one of the earliest inter-racial kisses screened on US television: Captain Kirk pecked Lieutenant Uhura on the lips. This worried NBC executives. They thought the scene might enrage TV stations in the more racially-prejudiced South. And in *Let That Be Your Last Battlefield* (1969), the *Enterprise* encounters the last couple of (alien) survivors of a war-ravaged planet, who are still hell-bent on annihilating each other. The reason for their illogical, extreme hatred is this: although ostensibly they look the same – half black and half white, divided by a line through the centre of their faces – one is darker on the left and lighter on the right; the other vice versa.

Even if he'd wanted to have overtly LGBT characters in the first iteration of his cosmic melodrama, Rodenberry would never have had approval from the network. Homosexuality was still illegal in the overwhelming majority of US states in the '60s. (By 1973, only four states had decriminalised homosexual relations between consenting adults.) Nevertheless, the producers of *Star Trek: Discovery*, one of whom, Eugene, is Rodenberry's son, have been faithful to his open-minded ideals, giving us Stamets. Gay character's in *Star Trek* say less about Roddenberry's vision of the 23rd Century than they tell us about America's growing acceptance of LGBTI people.

What's refreshing about Stamet's sexuality is that it isn't handled in a clichéd or heavy-handed manner. Viewers are initially introduced to him in episode three (*Context Is For Kings*), as a crew member routinely going about his duties. He shares a few scenes with Dr Hugh Culber (Wilson Cruz), but it's not until a later episode that we



**TREK GENERATIONS:** (FROM TOP) GEORGE TAKEI, NICHELLE NICHOLS, ZACHARY QUINTO AND CHRIS PINE.

discover they are an item. According to the executive producers they, "wanted to roll out that character's sexuality the way people would roll out their sexuality in life". When all is revealed, we casually drop in on a scene of the lovers standing side by side in the bathroom brushing their teeth. It's a restrained and ordinary depiction.

"We get to see me with my partner in conversation, in our living quarters," says Rapp. "You get to see our relationship over time, treated as any other relationship would be treated." What's more, in the instalment in which we learn about Stamet's and Culber's orientation, Stamet's is the undoubted hero, saving his ship.

Having a gay presence in *Star Trek: Discovery* is incredibly important considering the cultural phenomenon of the franchise. (As of 2016, it has grossed over \$US10 billion.) If I examine my own struggle with my sexuality, it's been invaluable. In Australia in the 1970s, an engaging nightly soap opera, *Number 96*, included the small screen's first openly gay character, Don Finlayson (played by Joe Hasham) as a well-rounded, likeable lead. However, I grew up in Britain, and at that time the only gay representations I saw were the limp-wristed Mr Humphries (John Inman) from *Are You Being Served?* and Lieutenant Hubert Gruber (Guy Siner), the German officer in *'Allo! 'Allo!* Although both were lovable in their own way, they were camp clichés that typified an era where "poofs" were the only homosexuals on the box.

What I cried out for was somebody I could relate to, which didn't happen until Russell T Davies' groundbreaking series, *Queer As Folk* (1999). It revolved around three non-straight males living in Manchester's gay village, who seemed as if they were real people, who had the same mixture of hopes, dreams, dilemmas and fears as the rest of us. Until then, like many others, I'd been the victim of homophobic socialisation, already knowing what my orientation was, but only seeing it portrayed as a sickness, perversion or crime. Such negativity can lead to marginalisation, depression and other mental health issues. *Queer As Folk* helped me recognise that I wasn't alone and that there were others like me. I overcame my low self-esteem, accepted who I was, and shortly after watching the second episode, came out.

Credit where it's due... Pleasingly, since the '90s, television has undergone a cultural revolution. Gay characters are now portrayed in a more complex, encouraging light: *Empire*, *Glee*, *Looking*, *Nashville*, *Six Feet Under*, *United States Of Tara*, to name a few. Even so, a 2016 Screen Australia study analysed 199 dramas broadcast between 2011 and 2015 and reported: "Up to 11 percent of Australians are of diverse sexual orientation or gender identity, but only 5 percent of characters in TV dramas were identifiably LGBT."

Unquestionably, there's work to do in terms of our visibility, especially as it will help increase acceptance of our community. In this context, Engineer Paul Stamets and Dr Hugh Culber in *Star Trek: Discovery* are more than welcome. It's a bold new world.