

MAN OF STEEL

By Charles Apple | THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

It’s a bird! It’s a plane! It’s an incredibly low-budget attempt to make a weekly TV series about a super-powered being from another planet who makes Earth his new home and fights for truth, justice and the American Way!

“The Adventures of Superman” starring George Reeves as the Man of Steel debuted in television syndication 70 years ago.

SUPERMAN’S FIRST APPEARANCES



DC COMICS

APRIL 1938: COMIC BOOKS

Science-fiction writer Jerry Siegel and illustrator Joe Shuster had been friends since their high school days in Cleveland. In 1933, they created a super-powered crimefighter in hopes of creating a syndicated comic strip. After a number of false starts, they finally sold their creation to appear in an anthology comic book called Action Comics. Superman was an immediate hit in April 1938.



COLUMBIA PICTURES



CBS RADIO

FEBRUARY 1940: RADIO SHOW

The character wasn’t even yet two years old when he was adapted into a radio show by New York’s WOR and syndicated by the Mutual broadcast network. Bud Collyer (shown) played Superman in more than 2,088 episodes — most of them 15 minutes long and running three to five times a week. The program became famous after a 1946 story arc in which Superman took on the Ku Klux Klan.



FLEISCHER STUDIOS

SEPTEMBER 1941: ANIMATED SHORTS

Brothers Max and Dave Fleischer ran their own successful animation studio, producing cartoons like “Popeye the Sailor” and “Betty Boop.” Paramount Pictures requested they do something with Superman. Uninterested, the Fleischers charged Paramount four times the going rate to make 17 10-minute shorts with Collyer again supplying the voice of Superman.

1948-50: MOVIE SERIALS

Columbia Pictures made 15-part, 16-minute-long live-action Superman serials in January 1948 and July 1950, starring Kirk Alyn as Superman and Noel Neill as Lois Lane. The production budget was so low that directors had to resort to animation to show Superman flying. The live-action shot of Alyn would fade to a cartoon — and then vice versa when Superman comes in for a landing.

‘ADVENTURES OF SUPERMAN’

In 1951, RKO Studios acquired the film rights to Superman and recast the primary characters for a movie, “Superman and the Mole Men.” George Reeves took over the title role and as “mild-mannered” reporter Clark Kent and Phyllis Coates played Lois Lane. as Superman looks into a pair of small creatures who unexpectedly emerge from the world’s deepest oil well.

A handsome, athletic leading-man type, Reeves career seemed on the fast track after he made an appearance as one of the Tarleton brothers who courted Scarlett O’Hara at the beginning of the 1939 film “Gone With the Wind.” After that, however, Reeves found himself mired in a series of forgettable parts in forgettable movies.

The producer immediately redirected his production crew and cast into making a TV series. However, the producers couldn’t find a network to take the new show. A season of 26 black-and-white episodes sat in the can for more than a year until Kellogg’s — which had sponsored the Superman radio show — stepped in to sponsor a syndicated TV version.

“Adventures of Superman” debuted in syndication on Sept. 19, 1952. The studio immediately launched production of a second season but found that, during the delay, Coates had taken on other work and was no longer available. Producers reached out to Neill — who had played Lois in the Columbia Pictures serials — to reprise her role. Neill would co-star as Lois Lane until the show ended, five seasons later.



WARNER BROS.

Reeves as Clark Kent, Noel Neill as Lois Lane and Jack Larson as Jimmy Olsen.

The TV show was a horribly low-budget production. In the beginning, the cast was paid just \$200 each per episode. Eventually, Reeves would be given a nice raise but other cast members saw compensation rise only a little.

Producers filmed four episodes every 10 days by grouping segments and took shooting them out of sequence: Every scene from four episodes that take place in Clark Kent’s office, for example, would be shot back to back. And then every scene set in editor Perry White’s office. And so on.

Producers attempted to use wires to film Superman’s flying scenes but that changed after a wire broke one day, dumping Reeves to the studio floor. A system was rigged up with a springboard just out of sight of the camera. Reeves would run toward a prop window, hit a springboard, appear to fly away — and then land on a mattress. With judicious editing and the addition of sound effects, Superman could appear to fly.

In 1955, the producers cut the length of each season in half, to just 13 episodes, but began filming in color to take advantage of expected advances in technology for home TV sets. However, color sets were still very expensive. It would be more than a decade before color TV would become common.

Reeves found the series brought him new fame but also new frustrations. He dispaired of the childish and formulaic plots of the weekly scripts. After three seasons, he threatened to quit. Producers attempted to bring back Alyn before Reeves relented and returned.

In 1958, the show’s producer made a pilot episode for a spin off show that would consist of a parallel world of the Superman universe — but populated by actors wearing cartoonish dog costumes. Network executives were horrified.

With plans in place for two more seasons of “Adventures of Superman,” actor John Hamilton — who played Perry White in the show — died in October 1958. As producers worked around that loss, Reeves was found dead in his bedroom on June 16, 1959, from an apparent suicide. He was 45.