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# Steve Austin. Astronaut. A man barely alive. Gentlemen, we can rebuild him... Sean Egan fondly remembers an icon of the '70s, Lee Majors' bionic man

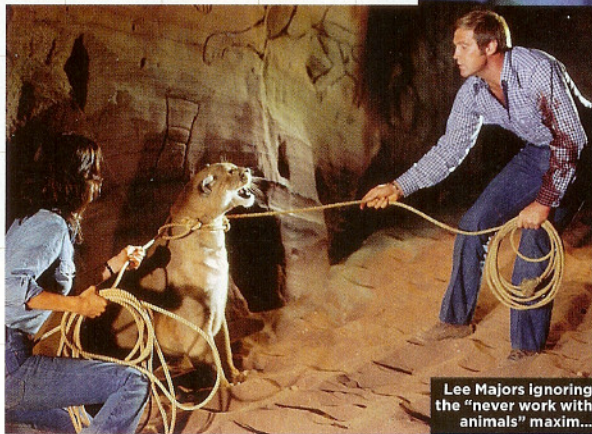
**M**any was the school playground of the mid-1970s that played host to the strange sight of kids running slower than they would normally walk.

Anyone who was around at the time will instantly get the reference to the dichotomy of slow motion to communicate speed as fast as sound. This was the technique used by the producers of *The Six Million Dollar Man* to demonstrate the superhero-like abilities of Steve Austin, an air force pilot who suffers terrible injuries in a plane crash but whose limbs are subjected to pioneering "bionic" surgery whereby metal and circuitry replaces mangled flesh. So cutting-edge is this surgical technology that it comes at a huge price. Naturally, having spent the titular sum (which equates to \$29m in today's money) on saving Austin's life, the United States military is reluctant to just let him go back to being a sky jockey. Austin becomes an operative for the Office of Scientific Intelligence, sent on missions wherever tyranny and injustice raise their heads. The result was TV gold and one of the keynote shows of the '70s, SF or otherwise.

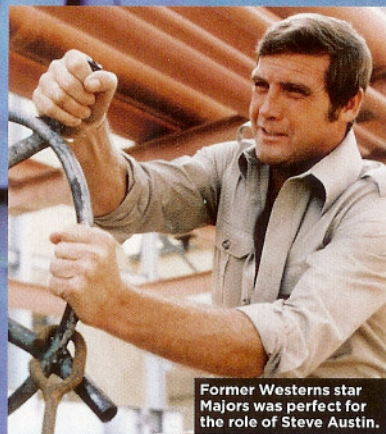
When US network ABC decided to make a two-hour telemovie based on Martin Caidin's novel *Cyborg*, they chose Lee Majors – then chiefly known for television show *The Big Valley* – to play Austin. Some people have unkindly remarked that Majors got the job because he had a laconic manner that was almost robotic in itself. However, for Majors' co-star Richard Anderson – who would play Austin's boss Oscar

Goldman – he was "Perfectly cast". Explains Anderson, "I think in a way it was underrated because he didn't ever look like he was acting at all, but he was... Excellent with memory. Amazing. He'd come in in the morning, then he'd look at the words and that would be it."

On 7 March 1973, Steve Austin made his television screen debut. The title had changed, and theories vary as to why: "Cyborg" was not that well-known a word at the time, although Caidin himself felt that the studio simply thought the new title more dramatic. However, the essential premise – filtered through the vision of co-scriptwriters Henri Simoun and an uncredited Steven Bochco – remained the same. The show ratcheted up the perennially popular secret agent format by virtue of weapons intrinsically more intriguing than guns and gadgets, namely a right arm that could break baddies in two, legs that could either >>



Lee Majors ignoring the "never work with animals" maxim...

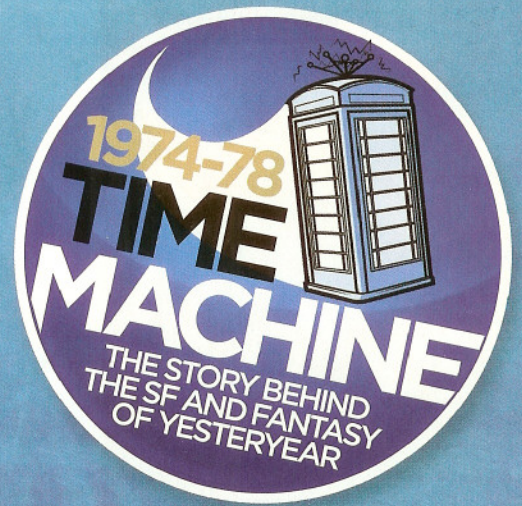


Former Westerns star Majors was perfect for the role of Steve Austin.

Images © ABC Photo Archives/Getty Images (2), Kobal Collection (1)

# THE SIX DOLLAR





# MILLION MAN





It could be said the show "jumped the Bigfoot", rather than the shark...



Was his chopper bionic as well?

propel up into the air beyond danger or chase down speeding vehicles, and a left eye with the ability to act like a telescope or take crucial photographs. Despite the superhero properties, the film retained some of the grittiness of Caidin's original vision, with Austin attempting suicide in hospital when he realises the extent of his injuries and being traumatised, post-bionic operation, when a woman blanches when she sees his interior circuitry.

With positive reviews and ratings, another TV film was commissioned. With *Wine, Women And War* (broadcast on 20 October '73), Oscar Goldman displaced Austin's boss in the first film, Oliver Spencer. Recalls Anderson, "Darren McGavin played him and they felt he was too heavy." Though Dr Rudy Wells, the man who put together and maintained Austin's multi-digit body, would be played by three different actors (Martin Balsam, Alan Oppenheimer and Martin E Brooks) during the programme's run, Anderson would remain head of the OSI throughout, not only in this programme but in its spin-off.

Once again, the movie did very well. Anderson: "Then we went on to do a third and when the third one just about got started, Glen Larson came down one day and said, 'We're going to have a series on Friday night at eight o' clock.'" It would not be Larson, though, who would helm the weekly series, which started broadcasting on 18 January 1974, two months after the third film (the 90-minute *The Solid Gold Kidnapping*) hit the screens. Larson had taken over as producer from Richard Irving, who had supervised the first movie, but he would in turn be replaced by Harve Bennett. Explains Anderson, "Glen was trying to make him a James Bond and it didn't work and they brought in Harve." Not only did Bennett dispense with the tuxedos and fantastical scenarios of the second and third movies, he introduced what would be the iconic motif of the series: Steve Austin's 60mph running ability rendered in slow motion. "But it was by accident," Anderson points out. Hitherto, blurred, speeded-up film had



Lindsay Wagner flew the female bionic flag.



Beige jackets didn't stop Steve Austin from being an action hero.

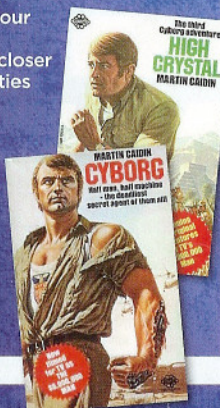


Now that's what you call a facelift.

communicated Austin's running prowess. Says Anderson of Bennett, "He was editing one day and he was looking at some dailies and Lee was in the dailies and suddenly it went into slow motion and he said, 'Well, why not?' They said, 'Let's get a sound man here and see what they can do'." Referring to the wrenching sound effect that would accompany Austin's slo-mo displays of strength, Anderson says, "They went da-da-da-da, and that, of course, became famous. I met the president to one of the countries in the Caribbean and he looked at me and went 'Da-da-da-da', and we both had a big laugh."

## BOOKS vs TV

Martin Caidin's *Cyborg* was the first of four novels featuring Steve Austin. Caidin's original vision was in many ways much closer to the prevailing technological possibilities than the TV incarnation of Austin, but a primitive left (not right, as in the programme) arm that was used merely as a blunt instrument and an eye that couldn't see but merely record were clearly too prosaic for TV producers. Conversely, the metal scalp and ribcage radio transmitter of the books didn't make the crossover. One thing family viewing made it impossible to import to TV was the fact that Caidin's Austin could be a cold-blooded killer.



### NEW SLOT

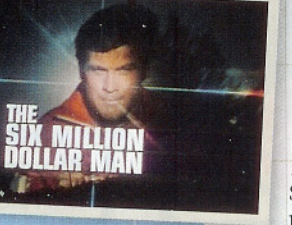
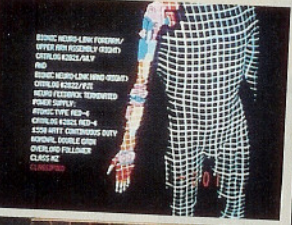
Anderson recalls the show really taking off after it was relocated from the Friday night slot it had had for its initial 13-episode run. "CBS put up a half-hour show against us, a comedy. They saw what would happen with the first rating or two and switched us to eight o' clock on Sunday night and there we were - we were home. Sunday night is the big night." *Six Million Dollar Man* comics, magazines, toys and action figures proliferated but the programme's cultural omnipresence can be measured not so much by merchandise but by the fact that the arcane word "bionic"



# THE OPENING TITLES

"Steve Austin, Astronaut. A man barely alive..."

You know what follows by heart: the iconic "Gentlemen, we can rebuild him" speech from Oscar Goldman that would open *The Six Million Dollar Man* each week. Written by Harve Bennett, it was recorded at an end of day dubbing session. Reveals Anderson, "I was trying to get home to learn the next day's work. I didn't think of it at all." The combination of his words and aircraft crash footage made for one of television's greatest curtain raisers: "When I saw it... what an opening. And the music and so forth. I just said, 'Wow!'"



Steve Austin wasn't just there to slug villains...

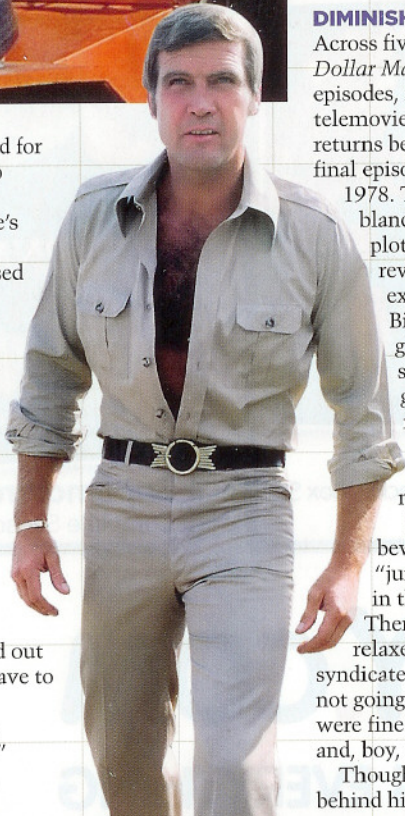


"Injuns! Millions of 'em!"

entered the language as a byword for almost any mechanical repair to damaged bodies.

For Anderson, the programme's success partly stemmed from a chord it struck with a traumatised country: "This show came on when the Vietnam War had ended. Everything was dark. Black hat. They were dark heroes. We really brought back the white hat." Not that the programme presented a hero whose sense of duty made him a mindless puppet for his government. Central to the dramatic dynamic of the series was Austin's ambivalence about his role. Anderson: "He kept saying, 'I don't want to do this any more. I've got to go find out who I am again'. And I would have to very, very definitely and also diplomatically tell him that the country is in need of your help."

The high-water mark for the programme – artistically and



commercially – came in March 1975 with a two-parter called "The Bionic Woman" in which Lindsay Wagner played Jaime Sommers, a high school sweetheart of Austin's who is horribly injured in a parachute jump. A distraught Austin demands that Wells do for her what he had done for him. Though Wells is indeed able to create a female counterpart to Austin, things go awry when Sommers' body rejects her bionic parts. Her death on an operating

table created an unusual degree of pathos for such a male-oriented show. "That came on the air and just destroyed the networks," recalls Anderson. "It was really a very fine two-parter and very exciting." Eventually, of course, a means was devised for Sommers to come back and she was given her own show.

### DIMINISHING RETURNS

Across five seasons, *The Six Million Dollar Man* racked up an even 100 episodes, in addition to the three telemovies. However, diminishing returns began to kick in well before its final episode was broadcast on 6 March 1978. The series became increasingly bland and predictable, too many plots hinging on hoary "Can we reverse the praw-cess?" exchanges, while tragic-villain Bigfoot began turning up with groan-inducing regularity, something made particularly galling by the programme's risible explanation for the cons-old Sasquatch mystery: the hairy one is a bionic beast manufactured by aliens.

However, Anderson seems bewildered by the idea that "jumping the shark" played a part in the cancellation: "Dead wrong. There's another reason. The studio relaxes. They need five years to syndicate. If they have five years, they're not going to push too hard. Our ratings were fine but they moved us to Monday and, boy, did that have an effect."

Though relieved to put 15-hour days behind him when the programme was

cancelled, it was Anderson who was behind the concept's eventual resurrection, acting as producer on telemovies *The Return Of The Six Million Dollar Man And The Bionic Woman* (1987), *Bionic Showdown* (1989) and *Bionic Ever After!* (1994). The first of these films featured a bionic son in the shape of Michael Austin, but the intended spin-off series never happened. "It didn't work in terms of this particular person they hired," says Anderson of actor Tom Schanley. "Seemed alright but it wasn't enough to say, 'Wow, let's go with this kid.'" Meanwhile, the entire franchise came full circle with the third movie as Steve and Jaime finally got married after so many years of being platonic friends.

## Rendering Steve's 60mph running ability in slo-mo was an accident

"Lindsay wanted to do that," reveals Anderson. "I said, 'Well, look, alright.' It's a wonderful ending."

Miramax and Universal currently jointly hold the rights to *The Six Million Dollar Man*, though a mooted film is taking an eternity to reach the screens. Even if said motion picture never happens, the series will never be forgotten. Anderson says, "It's almost bigger than what it was then... It's part of the American landscape. There might have been other shows similar – Westerns like *Gunsmoke* – but this was different because it really was science fiction, without all of the extenuating circumstances." Almost as though the warm reception of the public to the show has made him come to believe in the existence of the bionic man, Anderson quite touchingly adds, "Things were going on at that time too in terms of international things. You felt very good that Austin was around." **SFX**

