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Lee Majors looks back on the bionic man, Bigfoot and Farrah Fawcett

Nov. 29, 2010 | 11:15 a.m.



Lee Majors as Steve Austin on "The Six Million Dollar Man" (ABC)

Almost 40 years ago, when he was considering the starring role in a television movie about a "bionic man," Lee Majors had one major worry: "The big hits at the time were, like, Batman, you know how campy *that* was," Majors recalled. "I said, 'If you're thinking about making this a camp character, I don't want to do it.'"

"The Six Million Dollar Man" wasn't camp at all, and that choice proved to be right on the money for the landmark sci-fi adventure series. But now, in a wry twist of fate, Majors is working with SyFy on a comedy spoof in which he is the bionic mentor to a younger hero. "Hey, what goes around comes around," joked the easy-going Majors, who starred in eight television series — three of them big hits — and always looked so serene as he ran in slow motion through 1970s pop culture.

The signature success of his career is now getting its due with the elaborate 40-disc boxed set "The Six Million Dollar Man:

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The Complete Collection” (\$239.95; **TimeLife**, available only at **TimeLife’s website** for a limited time and then later going on sale everywhere). Inside are all five seasons (1974 to 1978) packaged in individual boxes, along with the six original made-for-TV movies (three of them reunion projects in 1987, 1988 and 1994), all the crossover episodes with spin-off series **“The Bionic Woman”** and hours of interviews and commentary tracks.



Andre the Giant and Lee Majors (ABC)

It’s a bit staggering as a massive television time capsule, but

Majors said he won’t be seeing a big check in the mail after the holiday shopping season. “If I see any money from it, it’ll be very little,” the 71-year-old said affably, adding that he enjoyed his peak fame long before anyone knew to ask for a cut of syndication and boxed-set sales. “But it’s a good excuse to get out and talk to people.”

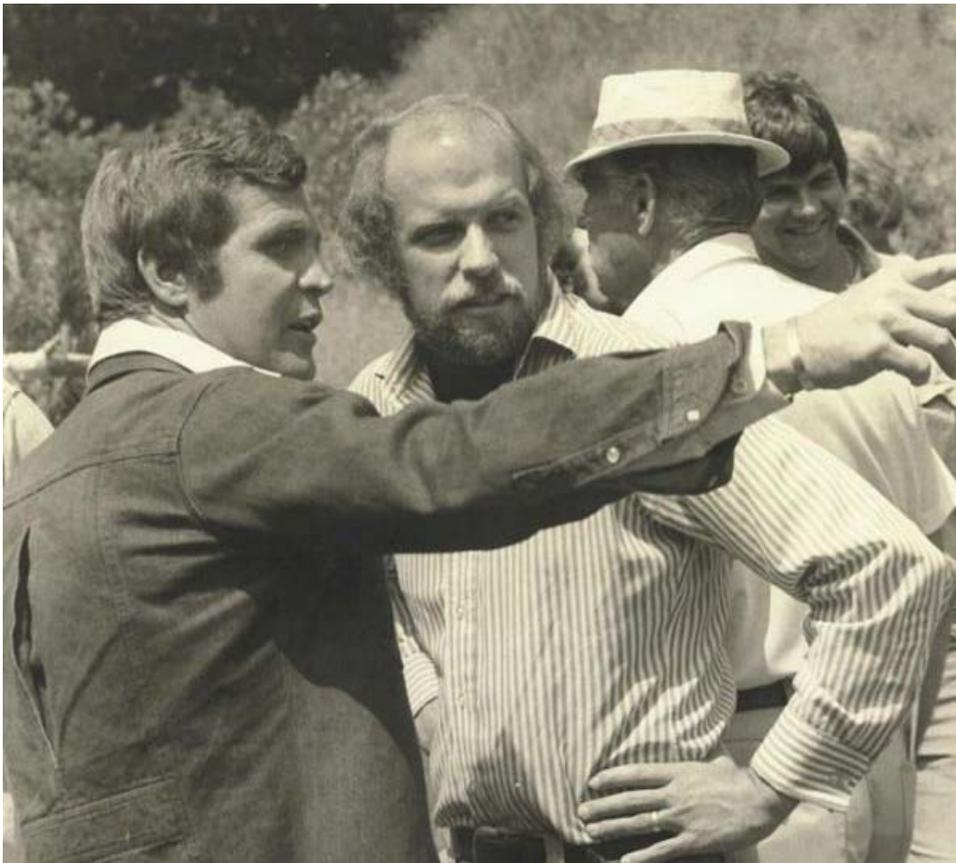
Majors is absolutely in public-engagement mode these days. For the first time in his life, Majors has begun to attend conventions, where he gets to see old friends like **Richard Anderson** and even **Lindsay Wagner**, not to mention fans clutching all sorts of toys. “It was amazing what people would bring in for me to sign,” says Majors, who also starred in “The Big Valley” and “The Fall Guy.” “There’s so much memorabilia I’ve never seen before. Board games, albums, comic books and all kinds of limbs from my body.”

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The real Majors had open-heart surgery in 2003, but the work has been steady in recent years, such as playing **God** on “**According To Jim**” and fun turns on the subversive **Showtime** hit “**Weeds**,” the **NBC** sitcom “**Community**” and the **Fox** action series “**Human Target**,” which is a contemporary counterpart in spirit to the bionic hit of the 1970s. The new work is what keeps Majors running, but he knows the boxed set will spark even more interest in his days as the machine man of the ABC network.

The show, based on the 1972 novel “**Cyborg**” by the late **Martin Caidin**, had plenty of touchstones, and the boxed collection runs with them. The set’s front features a **3D lenticular** image of Majors in the role of **Steve Austin**, the astronaut who suffered massive injuries in a terrible crash but was implanted with cutting-edge technology that gave him superhuman speed, superhuman strength (in one arm) and superhuman telescopic vision (in one eye). Tilt the box back and forth and Austin starts running. You have to provide your own **metallic-echo sound effect** the way kids have done in schoolyard exploits for decades, but open the lid and you hear Anderson’s voice-over intro to the series (“*Gentlemen, we can rebuild him. We have the technology...*”).

Majors has listened to fans recite that opening for decades. They also routinely mention two elements of the show: the Bionic Woman (for which Wagner won an Emmy) and **Bigfoot**, the hirsute giant that gave Austin his most sizable challenge and, through the performance by 7-foot-4 wrestler **Andre the Giant**, an unforgettable image for fans of the show.

Dark Shadows Darwyn Cooke David Duchovny
 David Eick David Mazzucchelli David Ng **David**
Tennant David Yates Dawn C. Chmielewski
DC Deadpool Dean Haspiel Deborah Vankin
 Dexter Dick Tracy digital comics **Disney**
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Grant Morrison greatest american hero Green
 Arrow **Green Hornet** **Green Lantern**
 Greg Braxton **Guillermo del Toro** Guy
 Ritchie H.P. Lovecraft **Harrison Ford**
Harry Potter Harvey Pekar Hayao
 Miyazaki **Heath Ledger** Hellboy Henry
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 Kirby Jake Gyllenhaal **James Bond**
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 statham Jay West Jeff Bridges Jeph Loeb
 Jerry Bruckheimer jet li **Jevon**

“We just got so much tremendous response from them,” Majors said about the multi-episode appearance of the creature. “Everybody loved them. People now believe there still is a Bigfoot. People go out there searching for this thing.... Andre was *so* big. We had this scene, we were out in the woods and he throws me about 10 yards and then he’s supposed to take a big run and jump up and land right on top of me. He throws me and I’m laying there and it’s a sunny day and the sun is in my eyes. All of a sudden, this dark cloud appears and he blocks the sun. I’m closing my eyes and waiting to be pancaked. And he did not even touch me. That’s how good he was. Those professional wrestlers are something else. That was one time I really thought I was going to get it.”

Majors knows about getting walloped. The Detroit native played football at **Eastern Kentucky University** but a severe back injury during a game left him incapacitated and unsure if he’d ever walk again. “I was in the hospital for two days, but it seemed more like two weeks,” Majors said. That ended his college career, and he headed to Los Angeles to take acting classes and work a job in the **city parks system** — a job he held even after landing the pilot for the western “**The Big Valley**,” starring **Barbara Stanwyck**. Aware of how fickle TV can be, Majors took a leave of absence on his city job rather than quitting outright. The skepticism lasted even after the series was picked up, and Majors only officially left his job a few years later.



Lee Majors and Farrah Fawcett from third season of “The Six Million Dollar Man” (Universal Television/ABC)

The role of **Heath Barkley** on the show gave him a catch phrase — “*Boy howdy!*” — which might have been a lesser man’s only claim to fame. Indeed, when the show was unexpectedly picked up for a final season, Majors had to turn down a role in “**Midnight Cowboy**.” **Jon Voight** famously went on wear the cowboy hat in that film, which won the Oscar for best picture of 1969. (On a positive note, a feature-film version of “The Big Valley” — with Majors now playing the father of Heath — is tantalizingly close to happening.)

Phillips Jim Henson Jim Starlin Joe Johnston
 Joel Silver Joe Sacco Joe Simon John Carpenter
John Horn John Lasseter John Milius John
 Noble **Johnny Depp** Jonah Hex **Jon
 Favreau** Joseph Kosinski Joss
Whedon Joyce Farmer Jurassic Park Karate Kid
 Katniss Everdeen **Kenneth Branagh** **Kenneth
 Turan** Kevin Smith Kick Ass King Kong
Kristen Stewart **L.A. events** Last
Airbender League of Extraordinary Gentlemen Lego
Leonard Nimoy Let Me In Liesel Bradner
 Lobo Lon Chaney **Lord of the Rings** Lost
M. Night Shyamalan Mad Magazine manga
 Marc Guggenheim Marc Webb Maria Elena Fernandez
 Mark Milian Mark Waid Martin Campbell
Marvel Mary McDonnell Mary
 McNamara Matt Damon **Matthew Vaughn**
 Matt Smith Merch Metropolis **Michael Bay**
 Michael Chabon Michael Ordoña Mike Mignola
 Mike Richardson Milla Jovovich MMORPG Moebius
 monsters motion comics Muppets **Music** Neal
Adams Neil Gaiman Neill Blomkamp
 Nicolas Cage Ninjas Noelene Clark No
 Ordinary Family Nosferatu Olivia Munn Olivia Wilde
 Pan's Labyrinth Panzer 88 **Patrick Day** Patrick
 Stewart Paul Newman Paul Pope Paul W.S. Anderson
Percy Jackson and the Olympians
Peter Jackson Philip K. Dick Piranha 3D
Pirates of the Caribbean Pixar Planet
 of the Apes Pokemon **Politics** Power Rangers
 Predator Prince of Persia
promobox **promobox-lede**
 Quentin Tarantino Quizzam R. Crumb R.L.
 Stine Rachel Abramowitz **Random**
silliness Ray Bradbury Rebecca
 Keegan Reed Johnson Religion review **Richard
 Donner** Rick Riordan **Ridley Scott** RIPD
 Robert Abele **Robert Downey Jr.** Robert
 Heinein **Robert Pattinson** Robert
Rodriguez Robert Zemeckis Robin Hood
 Robot Chicken Rocketeer Roger Corman Ron Howard
Ron Moore Russell Crowe **Ryan**
Reynolds Sam Mendes **Sam Raimi** Samuel
 L. Jackson Sam Worthington
 Sandman Saw Scarlett Johansson **Scott**
Pilgrim vs the World Scott Timberg
 Scream 4 Scream Awards **Seth Rogen** sex Sgt. Rock
Sherlock Holmes Shrek Signature Series
Sigourney Weaver Simpsons Sin City Six
 Million Dollar Man Smallville Smurfs special
 effects **Spider-Man** Spiderman Stan
 Lee Stan Winston Stargate **Star Trek**
Star Wars Stephenie Meyer stephen
 j. cannell **Stephen King** Steve Ditko Steve Niles
 Steven Moffat **Steven Spielberg** Steven
Zeitchik Sucker Punch Super
Superman Susan Carpenter **Susan**
King Suzanne Collins Swamp Thing SXSX
SyFy Sylvester Stallone Tarzan Taylor
 Lautner **Television** **Terminator** The
 Avengers The Cape The Crow **The Dark**

More TV work followed “Big Valley,” and Majors worked with talent like producer **Aaron Spelling** on an early TV movie about Vietnam vets and director **Steven Spielberg** in one of the *wunderkind’s* first assignments at Universal. Then came “The Six Million Dollar Man.” Like “**The A-Team**” in the 1980s, it was a bloodless action show, one reason Majors believes it proved such a hit for families.

“We never killed anybody,” says Majors. “We’d walk away [after a fight] and you’d see them getting up or rolling around. You knew they were alive. We didn’t use a lot of blood. It was basically a father-son, father-daughter show. A lot of kids watched it and they emulated it. I hope I wasn’t responsible for any broken bones.”

Majors insists that even though it and “The Bionic Woman” were in the Top 10, the impact the show had never really sank in. “When I was not working, I had a little place up in Arizona where I would spend my off time,” Majors said. “I didn’t have a television or a phone. I just fished and would grow a beard and hide out. I knew it was a big show and in the Top 10 but I never thought about how big it really was.”

But surely the tabloid madness surrounding him and then-wife **Farrah Fawcett** couldn’t be ignored?

“Well, we did have a problem then because she was doing ‘**Charlie’s Angels**,’” Majors says, moving on to discuss their divorce. “I saw her two weeks in one year, so that’s what happened to that. It wasn’t anything other than we didn’t have time to see each other.”

The 1980s brought the hit series “**The Fall Guy**,” which gave the guy’s-guy actor a chance to work with practically every stuntman in Hollywood. He hoped it would separate his career from his bionic days, and it did — to a degree. “I jumped at ‘The Fall Guy’ when it came along because I thought it might help me get rid of the Steve Austin image,” Majors said. “It didn’t, really. Everywhere you go that’s the one they remember. It doesn’t matter because I can say I’ve done eight other series and I’m still working. I can say I wanna be just like **Ernie Borgnine** when I grow up — 93 and still working.”

— Michael Giltz

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Lee Majors is absolutely the coolest guy on the planet! I have loved him from day one and will continue to follow his work and admire him as an actor. I wish him only the best and continued success in life, he truly deserves it, what a humble human being for all that he has done! Amazing!!

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