

sky
atlantic

Exposing the *Perry Mason* Myth

Brian McClinton

LIKE many teenagers in the late 1950s and early 1960s, my introduction to American popular culture came partly through listening on a transistor radio under the bed covers to Radio Luxembourg on 208 metres medium wave, especially the *D-E-C-C-A Record Show*. Many American companies had no pressing plant in the UK and much of it was manufactured by Decca, sometimes under that company's own name (e.g. RCA) and sometimes under the London, Brunswick or Coral labels used by Decca for these recordings. So this show featured artists such as Elvis Presley, Roy Orbison, the Everly Brothers, Little Richard, Fats Domino, Jerry Lee Lewis, Eddie Cochran, Sam Cooke, Ricky Nelson, Del Shannon, etc. – indeed the *creme de la creme* of American pop culture. It was unmissable, despite the frequent poor reception.

I also loved some of the American TV crime series. I recall two in particular. *77 Sunset Strip* featured two private investigators: Stu Bailey, played by Efreem Zimbalist Junior, and Jeff Spencer, played by Roger Smith. Then there was *Perry Mason*, in which Raymond Burr played the defence lawyer who rarely lost a case. In 271 episodes of this courtroom drama, which ran from 1957 to 1966, he was assisted by Della Street (Barbara Hale), his secretary, and Paul Drake (William Hopper), a private eye. Typically, witnesses or the real villain confessed in the dock. Moreover, we knew nothing about Mason's family or private life: Erle Stanley Gardner, his creator, maintained that such details were irrelevant to the crimes he was investigating.

In the summer, Sky Atlantic showed HBO's new eight-part miniseries *Perry Mason*, directed mainly by Tim Van Patten, which imagines the protagonist's life in the early 1930s before he became a lawyer, and in so doing seeks to subvert the earlier pristine image. Of course, if we know nothing about Mason's extra-



judicial life, then it is easier to think of him as a perfect hero, but the makers of this series seek to shatter this myth. Here, as played by Matthew Rhys (above), he is a dour, stubbled, alcoholic, private investigator, with a dishonourable discharge in the Great War, PTSD, a failed marriage, and living on an inherited two-cow dairy farm close by an airfield. He is as far removed from Raymond Burr's upright legal superhero as you could imagine.

The demythologisation doesn't stop there. Not only is the main villain a policeman but also the entire LAPD is presented as a corrupt mafia-like organisation. The lone exception is a black officer called Paul Drake (Chris Chalk), who will later give up his badge and become Mason's private investigator, just as Mason will cease to be a private eye and become a lawyer. Even Della Street has a makeover: she is in a lesbian relationship and has a distinctly feminist edge, ultimately demanding equality with Mason in the new legal firm.

And there's more. Evangelical religion also comes out badly. At the heart of the story is the kidnapping and death of a baby whose corpse is recovered with its eyes stitched open. The baby's parents belong to the Radiant Assembly of God, led by a charismatic faith healer Sister Alice (Tatiana Maslany). It turns out that the church is also riddled with corruption and that it had debts of \$100,000, the exact amount demanded by the kidnappers.

The makers of this new *Perry Mason* seem to have an even more ambitious target, however, namely the myth perpetrated by Trump and others of a great American past – a country dedicated to liberty, truth and justice, a country that does the right thing, and a practical nation that 'gets things done'. By having Drake as a black cop, they emphasise that there were no black officials in the original series. By having Street as a feisty lesbian, they emphasise that women were either slaves or sluts in the original.

Above all, the loose ends of the case that occupied the eight episodes are not tied up. How did the baby die? And who was responsible? Mason thinks he knows the answer but it is never tested in court. At the beginning of the last episode, he thinks of putting the chief suspect, Sgt Ennis, in the dock, but Hamilton Burger, the assistant DA, tells him: "No one ever confesses on the stand". The point is that they always did in the original.

In the end Mason has to accept that, although he has achieved a mistrial, he has not proved the mother's innocence or Ennis's guilt. He has failed to ensure that truth and justice are done and seen to be done. He blows the thread from the baby's eye into the Pacific, symbolising that it is time to let the case go and move on to the next one. This is the way the world really is: often messy and impenetrable; and our attempts at fitting the pieces of the jigsaw together are, at best, only moderately successful.

This dark, superbly acted and visually stunning reboot will not be for those who want their crime thrillers to have neat endings when the hero catches and exposes the killer. But it is a brilliant exposé of the *Perry Mason* myth, and simultaneously a debunking of the myth of American exceptionalism. There is to be a second series, and it will be fascinating to see where they take the story on from here. □