

# Introduction

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He looked like Steve McGarrett. He dressed like Joe Mannix. But he acted like no other private detective prime time television had ever seen.

When he threw a punch, Jim Rockford (James Garner) was more likely to hurt his own hand than his opponent. He rarely carried a gun (he didn't have a permit), and on those occasions when he did, he was more likely to point the weapon than fire it. Rockford hated trouble, wouldn't hesitate to quit in the middle of a case if things got too rough, and had no qualms about telling you why ("You're damned right I'm afraid!"). But he did like money: he charged \$200 a day, plus expenses, so he'd hang in there no matter what if he could smell a fat check down the road. "I won't kill for money, and I won't marry for it," he once said. "Other than that, I'm open to just about anything."

Most private eyes—at least, the ones we see portrayed in movies and on television—have a lieutenant friend on the police force with whom they trade information in the course of a given case. But because Rockford was an ex-con (he was unjustly convicted of armed robbery and served five years in prison before receiving a full pardon), he didn't always trust the police. For that matter, nearly everyone in the Los Angeles Police Department despised Rockford because he had a propensity for solving cases that the cops had either closed or considered unsolvable. In fact, whenever Rockford showed up at headquarters with a broken nose or a bloody lip, morale in the department automatically went up ten percent!

The one cop willing to stand up for our man Jimbo was the overworked and grossly underappreciated Sergeant Dennis Becker (Joe Santos), who genuinely liked Rockford even though he was occasionally embarrassed by their relationship, particularly whenever it interfered with his police duties.

Rockford had a lot of other characteristics that TV audiences could identify with. He had a paunch (he had a weakness for Oreo cookies). He also liked to drink beer and eat fast food (in one episode, Becker calls him "the taco king"). He preferred watching baseball and basketball games over the theater or opera. He didn't like to exert himself (if he could, he'd spend all day fishing on the beach). He didn't like going to the dentist (he once put off a root canal

appointment four times). He'd go to any lengths (even asking for a note from his doctor) to avoid jury duty.

Rockford could be a rascal—he was once considered one of the finest grafters in the business. But he also had a sweetness that particularly came across in his relationship with his father, Joseph “Rocky” Rockford (Noah Beery), a retired truck driver who doesn't quite understand what his son does for a living. Rockford had a big heart (sometimes, despite himself), which explains why he occasionally worked *pro bono* for his friend and attorney Beth Davenport (Gretchen Corbett). But he also had a limited amount of patience, which was often exhausted by the exasperating antics of his former cellmate Angel Martin (Stuart Margolin).

Fueled by excellent writing, memorable characters, and the star power of James Garner, *The Rockford Files* enjoyed a solid six-season run on NBC (1974-1980), and remains one of the most beloved television programs of all time. Winner of five Emmys, including Best Actor (Garner) and Best Dramatic Series (1978), *Rockford* came back with a splash in 1994 as a series of two-hour movies on CBS. Reruns of the original NBC series have played continuously in syndication and on national cable TV over the past 25 years, while the reunion movies from CBS have been a staple of Court TV and the Hallmark Channel since early 2001.

Of course, in some ways, Jim Rockford wasn't original at all: he was Bret Maverick reincarnated, the folksy, quasi-con man who would change his mind in a minute if he thought it would get him out of trouble. Like Maverick, Rockford was a man much smarter than he let on, and who couldn't care less about being a hero.

All of which was deliberate. *The Rockford Files* first sprouted from the fertile mind of Roy Huggins, the creative force behind *The Fugitive* and *77 Sunset Strip*, as well as the man who had helped make Garner a star years before on *Maverick*. Huggins understood Garner's uncanny knack for playing wry, understated humor like few others. That Garner's greatest successes on television are tied directly to Huggins is no coincidence.

You actually could break down *The Rockford Files* into three different series: the episodes from the first year, when it was a Top Ten hit; the shows from the second year, when it lost a huge chunk of audience that it would never recover; and the episodes from the remaining four seasons, when it started winning all those Emmy Awards.

*Rockford* in its first season (1974-1975) was to private-eye shows what *Maverick* was to Westerns in the 1950s: fresh, irreverent, and clever. At a time when network TV was saturated with flatfoots and gumshoes, *Rockford* took all the clichés and turned them inside out. NBC programming executives may

not have understood the show's sophisticated sense of humor, but the viewers certainly did, taking to Garner like a long-lost friend. *Rockford* suddenly made it cool to stay home on Friday nights.

When the first season ended, executive producer Roy Huggins left *Rockford* in the hands of his protégé Stephen J. Cannell (now the author of such bestselling crime novels as *The Plan*, *King Con*, *Final Victim*, *Riding the Snake*, *The Devil's Workshop*, *The Tin Collectors*, *The Viking Funeral*, *Hollywood Tough*, *Runaway Heart* and *Vertical Coffin*). Though Cannell understood Maverick/Rockford almost as well as his mentor, and had himself created two of the show's greatest characters (Rocky and Angel), he initially lost sight of what made *Rockford* work—and the show suffered as a result. The key to *Rockford* was that, no matter what, Jim Rockford was always smarter than anyone else. But that wasn't the case early in the second season (1975-1976) when, week after week, Jimbo found himself played like a fool, particularly by his own friends.

Both *Maverick* (and *Rockford* under Huggins) dared to invert that most sacred of TV rules: the hero always comes out on top in the end. *Maverick*/*Rockford* was occasionally done in by his own mercenary tendencies, often to hilarious effect. But Huggins also knew that the key to breaking the rules was doing so with restraint. The audience was bound to grow tired of watching if *Rockford* ended up with egg on his face every week.

That's exactly what happened in the second season. By Halloween, *Rockford* had lost nearly 20% of its total audience; by the end of the season, it was finishing third in a time slot it once owned. Though Cannell recognized the problem with the stories, and was able to steer the series back on track, *Rockford* would never see the Top Ten (or even the Top 20) again.

Then a funny thing happened in the third season (1976-1977). Buoyed by the addition of writer/producer David Chase (*The Sopranos*), the stories got better, the audience numbers steadied . . . and the show started winning awards.

Chase's versatility breathed new life into *Rockford*. In addition to populating the series with a wide array of colorful characters, the stories began tackling everything from controversial social issues to Chase's own peculiar obsession with the mob. In the process, Jim Rockford became reinvented as a sort of Everyman, a lone voice of common sense in a world of increasing absurdity.

*Rockford* also survived a number of controversies that plagued the series behind the scenes. NBC was initially reluctant to finance the pilot because of its previous experience with Garner in the ill-fated Western series *Nichols*. A conflict between Garner, Huggins and executive producer Meta Rosenberg led to the departure of Huggins after the first season. Problems fomented by the show's approach to humor during the second season led to an angry confrontation between Garner and Universal Television president Frank Price. A power

play between Universal Studios and Garner's production company resulted in the loss of one of the show's most popular characters, Beth Davenport. Finally, the abrupt end of *The Rockford Files* (brought on by Garner's illness in December 1979), coming on the heels of a startling report indicating that the series was nine million dollars in the red, precipitated a bitter legal battle between the actor and the studio that would last nearly ten years.

We'll explore these aspects of the show's history, and much, much more.

I also discovered, as I conducted interviews for this book, that the people who made *Rockford* all remember the series with affection. Ask anyone who has ever worked on the staff or crew of a James Garner production, and they will all characterize their experience in one word: *family*. You'll get a sense of what that environment was like through the recollections of many members of the Garner family: Juanita Bartlett, Jo Swerling, Luis Delgado, Gretchen Corbett, Charles Floyd Johnson, Jack Wilson, Jack Garner, and MaryAnn Rea. In addition, Roy Huggins, Stephen J. Cannell and Frank Price will walk us through the events leading to the premiere of the series. Plus, you'll hear from James Garner himself ... the actor, the director, the employer, and the man.

This is Jim Rockford. This is the 30-year history of *The Rockford Files*.