

Welcome to American Mosaic from VOA Learning English.

I'm June Simms.

A new "Star Trek" movie is out! Today, we talk about the influence of the popular television and movie series.

We also play music from the latest album by Vampire Weekend.

And we go to California to learn what's happening to the dirty Los Angeles River.

The Power of "Star Trek"

Another movie based on the television show "Star Trek" recently opened in theaters. "Star Trek Into Darkness" has led to new discussion about the show's influence on science, technology and society. Christopher Cruise has more.

Star Trek's spaceship is well-known to people who have watched the TV series. And those who did not can still see the first model of the Enterprise. It can be seen at the Smithsonian Institution's National Air and Space Museum in Washington.

The imaginary spacecraft led to the name of the American space agency's first space shuttle, says museum official Margaret Weitekamp.

"Well, the very first space shuttle was actually named Enterprise as a result of a write-in campaign organized by Star Trek fans of the 1970s."

That is just one sign of Star Trek's influence. Ms. Weitekamp recently spoke about the subject in a group discussion at the museum. She notes that the series was first broadcast in the late 1960s, when women and minorities were pressing for equal rights.

“Star Trek has been a really important vision not only of what future space flight could look like, but also a reflection of what the hopes were, especially in the 1960s, for what human society could look like. So, very importantly in 1966, it’s a mixed sex, racially integrated, multinational space crew that even includes an alien.”

The first Star Trek series also showed technologies that have become reality, says Pace University Professor Nancy Reagin. She served as editor of the book “Star Trek and History.”

“You see the first depiction of a plasma screen TV; you see the first depiction of what would call a cell phone. I mean the communicators – they sort of flip open just like the first cell phone that I ever had. You see the first example of Bluetooth technology, where Uhura is wearing the little Bluetooth in her ear. You see the first use of tablets, you know, where they’re using the multi-touch pads.”

Star Trek still excites engineers, says Mike Gold of Bigelow Aerospace. The company is developing next-generation spacecraft.

“I’d like to think that our entire program is again very much in keeping with the spirit of Star trek, which is to push the boundaries for human exploration.”

He says the Bigelow Expander Activity Module will be tested on the International Space station in 2015. The module, called BEAM for short, is yet another example of Star Trek’s influence. The show made famous the words, “Scotty, beam me up.” This was the command given to the engineer who controlled teleportation of crewmembers.

The new film appeals to Star Trek fans old and new. Fans and astronauts, and the stars and writers of “Star Trek Into Darkness,” discussed the appeal of the series on a Google Hangout.

Astronaut Kjell Lindgren said Star Trek fuels the imagination.

“That’s one of the real fun things about these movies and science fiction in general: it’s just that opportunity to imagine what the future could be like and what technology is going to be like.”

Star Trek has been a part of popular culture for almost 50 years. And with yet another movie being planned, the series will continue to inspire people to think about space, the final frontier.

To Clean A River

The Los Angeles River is a man-made water passage. It collects dirty water from storm drains. Sadly, it has become a place where much of the city's waste collects. But as Katherine Cole reports, the river is being cleaned up thanks to volunteers.

Thousands of volunteers appeared on a recent weekend to remove the waste from the Los Angeles River. The amount of trash has been growing as a result of winter rain storms.

Engineers added a concrete lining to the bottom of the waterway in the 1930s after years of periodic flooding. Volunteer Carol Henning says it now looks like a river again, at least in some places.

“Well, it’s beginning to look a little better. My memory of the river was people having drag races in the LA River on the cement bottom.”

Part of the LA River was used for filming a car race in the 1978 movie, “Grease.” Today parts of the river have been turned into a recreation area. There are plants growing along the water, and some of the birds, fish and other wildlife have returned.

Los Angeles poet Lewis McAdams launched the group Friends of the LA River in 1986. He says the waterway is no longer considered the city’s ugly back yard.

“Now it is increasingly the front yard of the city. People don’t ignore it. More and more people come down. This is the 24th annual LA River clean-up. We figure at this point we have cleaned up and taken out about a million pounds (450 kilograms) of trash out of the LA River.”

Some objects found in the clean-up surprise the volunteer clean-up crew. John Dubler is a volunteer from the Disney Company.

“We find snack bags and clothing. It is amazing what you see. Little CDs.”

There are food store carts, building materials and floor coverings.

Volunteer Jack Lebic says there is one very common object.

“Tons and tons of plastic bags. I think that is the number one. And they are buried underneath here.”

It is a yearly effort that is paying off -- with a river that is, once again, starting to look like a river.

Vampire Weekend’s Number One Album

“Modern Vampires of the City” is the latest album from New York City-based band Vampire Weekend. This week it entered “Billboard” magazine’s Top 200 albums chart at number one. The group’s most recent album, “Contra”, was a Billboard number one in 2010. But the similarity ends there.

Vampire Weekend has reformed its sound. “Modern Vampires of the City” seems a more simple production than “Contra” and the song lyrics feel more serious. Much of the music has religious themes or subjects.

“Ya Hey” is a good example. It sounds a lot like Yahweh, the Hebrew name for God. And band member Ezra Koenig sings about Zion, Babylon and a saint, or holy person, in the first verse.

This is the third album for Vampire Weekend. Its first, called “Vampire Weekend”, came out in 2008. The four members of the band met while they were attending Columbia University in New York City. The four still live in the New York area.

Vampire Weekend usually produces its own albums. But, on “Modern Vampires of the City,” band members tried something new. They asked for help from producer Ariel Rechtshaid. He is known for his work with Usher, Kylie Minogue and Plain White Ts.

The band also worked with actor Steve Buscemi, who directed a live webcast of its performance last month at the Roseland Ballroom in New York.

Vampire Weekend performed on the American television show, "Saturday Night Live", earlier this month. We leave you with one of the songs they played. Here is "Diane Young."

I'm June Simms. Our program was written by Christopher Cruise and Caty Weaver, who was also the producer. Suzanne Presto and Mike O' Sullivan provided additional reporting.

Do you have a question about American life? Send an e-mail to mosaic@voanews.com.

Join us again next week for music and more on American Mosaic from VOA Learning English.