

The 50-year mission of Nichelle Nichols

Enduring 'Star Trek' actress at DTC's StarFest this weekend

By PETER JONES

A kiss is just kiss ... unless it happens to be network television's first interracial kiss.

"While we were doing it, Bill Shatner was joking. He said, 'I told you I'm going to get to kiss you.' The next thing you know, there was this thing about it," actress Nichelle Nichols said.

The controversial kiss between Nichols and William Shatner on *Star Trek* may seem quaint nearly 50 years later. But in 1968, the prospect of an openly interracial kiss on network television seemed as distant as intergalactic travel.

NBC brass even considered pulling the kiss for fear of offending viewers in the South. Racial tensions were at their height on Nov. 22, 1968, when "Plato's Stepchildren," the episode that saw Capt. Kirk famously plant a space-age smooch on Lt. Uhuru, first aired. At the time, the United States was still reeling from Martin Luther King's assassination seven months earlier. The kiss occurred on a Hollywood soundstage three years after race riots across town in Watts had also shocked many TV viewers.

Nichols laughs when she recites — in a Southern accent — the gist of a letter that series' creator Gene Roddenberry received after the kiss episode first aired.

"I'm opposed to the mixin' of the races," she said in a drawl. "But anytime a red-blooded American boy like Capt. Kirk gets a gal in his arms that looks like Lt. Uhuru, he ain't gonna fight it."

Nichols will kiss and tell more at the StarFest convention, May 2-4, at the Marriott Denver Tech Center and the Denver Hilton Garden Inn across the street.

Where no woman had gone before

Despite her full mane of gray hair, Nichols looks at least a decade younger than her 81 years. It was nearly a half century ago that the actress first launched the role that would make her the pin-up darling of the Trekkie set.

Nichols, a singer who performed with Count Basie and Lionel Hampton in her native Chicago, was sometimes given the opportunity to sing on *Star Trek*. But Roddenberry did not want any standard 20th century phrasing from the songstress.

"It was more ethereal," Nichols said. "He didn't want it to be jazz, blues or Broadway pop, but to take it to the stars, if you will."

Although she initially resisted auditioning for the part of the leggy communications officer, Nichols was soon a convert to Roddenberry's vision of a socially conscious 22nd-century starship, epitomized by the lieutenant's name Uhuru being the Swahili word for "freedom." According to Nichols, the producer's original idea was to simply stage "amazing stories" of utopian idealism.



Nichelle Nichols will attend StarFest May 2-4
Marriott Denver Tech Center and the Denver Hilton Garden Inn
For tickets and more information, visit www.starland.com

"All hailing frequencies open, Captain." Nichelle Nichols nearly jumped ship after the first season until Martin Luther King "ordered" her back to her station.

"He wanted to write about the human condition, including men and women and people of all races as equals," she said. "The studio said, 'Gene, the world isn't ready for what

you're talking about — maybe in 300 years.' So Gene smiled, said thank you and set the whole thing 300 years in the future on a starship."

During the Enterprise's proverbial

five-year mission (but only a brief three seasons on the air), the ship traversed through a range of contemporary universes — from racism to war — but all from the relative safety of a science-fiction context.

In one episode, an interplanetary figure whose face was half-white and half-black was locked in a deadly battle with his antagonist — a man whose face had the same colors, but on the opposite sides.

"It was something that we were all really proud to be a part of. The cast would sit and talk about the story lines. It was something exciting," Nichols said.

At the end of the first season, however, Nichols was ready to beam her way back into musical theater. She had not considered the show's social significance in her decision. But the actress reconsidered on what she calls the direct "orders" of Martin Luther King Jr.

"You cannot!" the civil-rights leader demanded when he heard of her plans to quit the show. "Can't you see what [Roddenberry] is trying to achieve here?"

Nichols was stopped in her tracks, dumbfounded.

"He tells me what an important television series it is and it's one of the only shows he allowed his children to stay up for," she said.

Nichols remembers Roddenberry's response when she told him she would not be turning in her Star Fleet uniform after all.

"God bless Dr. King," the producer said as a tear ran down his cheek. "Somebody knows what I'm trying to do."

The kiss-off

Nichols' memories of Shatner are not as sentimental. When it comes down to it, the actress did not think much of the historic kiss — or the kisser for that matter.

"Over the years, Bill became very self-involved," she said. "He would go to the director and have your lines cut. It was grossly disrespectful."

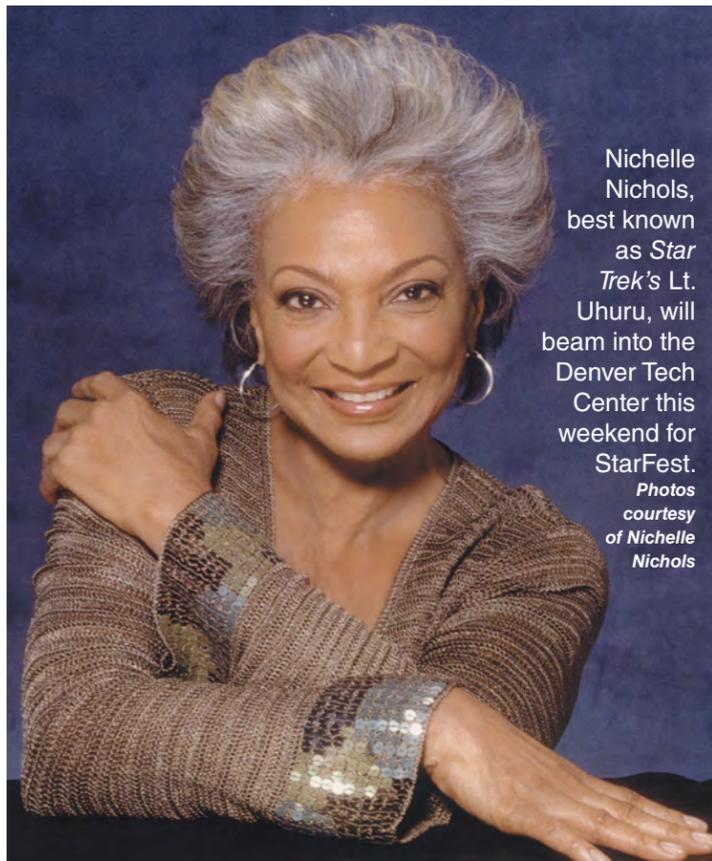
According to Nichols, insult met injury when Shatner claimed in his autobiography that the famous kiss never happened, that it had been fudged for the camera — a contention vehemently denied by Nichols.

The actress says she got revenge of a sort some years ago when some of her fellow cast members reunited for a comic roast of the former Capt. Kirk.

"I looked at Bill and said, 'Let's give history another chance,'" Nichols recalled. "Bill just sat there. Then he pulled himself out of his chair and forced himself to get up."

The room erupted in a standing ovation when Nichols wryly told Shatner where he could kiss her this time.

"I broke up laughing," she said. "It took me 40 years to tell [him] what I really thought about him."



Nichelle Nichols, best known as *Star Trek's* Lt. Uhuru, will beam into the Denver Tech Center this weekend for StarFest.

Photos courtesy of Nichelle Nichols