



The Magazine of Television Heaven

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Mike Spadoni's View from America



Mike Spadoni wrote over 100 reviews and articles for **Television Heaven** and **Teletronic** over a period of many years. This issue of **TVH** pays tribute to his work by publishing fifty articles on classic (and some not-so-classic) American TV shows and personalities.



A to Z of Classic US TV Shows



Biographies

Television History

Opinion

50 Articles by Mike Spadoni

Michael Spadoni made his living as a radio news producer and writer in Las Vegas, Nevada.

As a child he said he was the first on his block to have his own TV set in his bedroom (an old Packard Bell console), and his family was the first on the block to have a colour set ("a 1965 Sears Silvertone 23 inch console with contemporary styling--mom's preference"). From an early age, Mike, like many of his generation fell in love with 'the box.'

Later, Mike entered the full high definition age with a 26 inch Sony Wega LCD set, an HD hard drive recorder, and a recorder for DVD and videotape--plus Dolby surround sound. "But there were times I missed my 1983 Mitsubishi 19 inch set that never failed me in the 20 years I owned it."

And like any other television fan, his cabinets were filled with tapes and DVD's of old television series and classic commercials. ("Not to mention a few newer favourites." - he would say).

Mike first started writing about US TV shows on Television Heaven's forum and his musings were so insightful and entertaining that I approached him and asked if he'd like to write a regular column for the main website. As a result '*Mike Spadoni's View from America*' became a regular feature on **Television Heaven** for a number of years. He was also a regular contributor to the website, writing with enthusiasm - reviews, articles and historical pieces in which his great passion for the medium shined brightly.

I finally got to meet Mike in person in 2011. We met up in Las Vegas with my family and Mike's partner, Kevin. It was all too brief and the one and only time we would meet, although we did enjoy Skype calls quite regularly. And then Mike was diagnosed with Cancer.

Michael fought his illness with hope, determination and good humour, but sadly he lost his battle in August 2017.



Mike's good friend Dennis McBride recalls one of his fondest memories of Michael: "Some



years ago the Unitarian Universalists in Las Vegas hosted a series of Sunday film nights for the LGBTQ community. We took turns introducing the film, giving some background and history. The Sunday night it was Mike's turn, he started talking about the film we were about to see but then grew teary-eyed. He announced that he couldn't keep his mind on the film because he'd

just met the love of his life! He told us all about this love, how they met, and what the relationship meant to him. I'd known Mike for many, many years and I had never seen him so joyful. I found it a great pleasure that he shared this story with us and I was happy for him.

I always admired Mike's professionalism. The photograph I'm including (see last page) of Mike interviewing Nevada State Assemblyman David Parks took place at a March 21, 1999 political rally at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas in support of Parks' Assembly Bill 311--Nevada's version of the Employment Non-Discrimination Act that sought to protect job rights for the queer community. Mike was working then for KNUU-AM radio and he was the only member of the press to attend.

I know he struggled in his career, bounced around a lot, but I never knew him to be down-at-heel or down-in-the-mouth about anything that happened to him. He always persevered. I find myself frequently thinking about Mike when this or that happens and wondering, "What would Mike make of this?"

The photo I've included of Mike and me at Gay Pride 2001--in later years he got thin and I got fat! Miss him a lot."

Many of Mike's contributions can be found on the **Television Heaven** website and the remainder of his reviews, many of which were TV shows that were never broadcast outside of the USA and which have been unpublished for a number of years, are now proudly reproduced in this tribute issue of **TVH** (as well as other articles). I hope you enjoy them as much as I do and, undoubtedly, as much as Mike enjoyed writing them.

Mike's Reviews A - Z

According to Jim - 2001



This family comedy about a lumpy breadwinner married to a hot-looking wife became a surprise hit in ABC's long tradition of domestic sitcoms.

But *According to Jim* was no *Roseanne* or *Home Improvement* in terms of quality. Jim Belushi (brother of the late comic John) played Jim, a macho contractor; his understanding and loving wife was Cheryl, played by Courtney Thorne-Smith, veteran of *Melrose Place* and *Ally McBeal*. The couple had three young children--Ruby (Taylor Atelian), Gracie (Billi Bruno) and Kyle (Conner Rayburn), and they all lived together in a Chicago home. (The surname of Jim and his family was never disclosed.)

Also in the cast was Andy (Larry Joe Campbell), Jim's brother-in-law and business partner. Cheryl also had an insecure, man-hunting sister named Dana (Kimberly Williams-Paisley). The show's premise essentially came down to Jim getting into a jam (usually over some "battle of the sexes" issue), with Cheryl forgiving him by the end of the episode.

It was all fill-in-the-blank comedy, but it struck a cord with enough viewers to make "Jim" a moderate success (even coming close to beating NBC's more sophisticated *Frasier* in head-to-head competition). But the critical barbs continued.

"*Entertainment Weekly*" wrote in its Fall 2003 TV preview: "And our award for Most Justifiably Paranoid Executive Producer goes to Suzanne Bukinik, who's convinced we're going to mock Jim Belushi's family sitcom, just because we have done it every year before." Belushi had the last laugh: *According to Jim* ran for eight seasons until it was finally put to rest in 2009--the same year ABC introduced *Modern Family*, a far funnier and fresher take on domestic life. Which must account as a victory of sorts.

All American Girl - 1994



Korean-American Margaret Cho was one of many stand-up comics in the 1990's to earn a shot as a situation comedy star. Cho

played Margaret Kim, a young woman who lived with her traditional Korean-American family; the setting was apparently San Francisco.

She worked in the beauty counter of a department store, and her independent ways about dating, finding a new career and living her own life clashed with her mother and father (Jodi Long and Clyde Kusatsu), who wanted Margaret to settle down with a good Korean man and become a wife and mother. Older brother Stewart (B.D. Wong, who would later go on to co-star on *Law & Order: SVU*) was engaged and studying to be a doctor; younger brother Eric (J. B. Quon) looked up to her.

Maddie Corman and Judy Gold played her co-workers Ruthie and Gloria. Amy Hill was Grandma, who was generally supportive of Margaret's goals. Cho later wrote in her book "*I'm The One That I Want*," about her brief experience as a sitcom star, and her addiction to drugs and alcohol. ABC executives thought she was a bit overweight; she went on a starvation diet but by the time the show's pilot was taped, she suffered from kidney problems.

Cho was also criticized for being either "too Asian" or "not Asian enough;" producers hired a coach so she could become "more Asian." And the series was blasted by critics for its broad comedy and stereotypical depictions of Koreans and gays. Despite several format changes, the show was cancelled after one season. Cho used her experience on *All-American Girl* as comic fodder, with her book and a one-woman show that won acclaim. In April 2011, Cho guest starred on the comedy *30 Rock* in the episode "*Everything Sunny All the Time Always*." She portrayed Kim Jong-Il, then the leader of North Korea, that required her to speak both Korean and English. She was nominated for a Primetime Emmy Award for Outstanding Guest Actress in a Comedy Series.

She continues to perform on stage, and in TV and film roles and has also had endeavours in fashion and music, and has her own clothing line. Cho has also frequently supported LGBT rights and has won awards for her humanitarian efforts on behalf of women, Asian Americans, and the LGBT community.

Mike's Reviews A - Z

Angel - 1960

I Love Lucy co-creator Jess Oppenheimer came up with this sitcom about American architect John Smith (Marshall Thompson) and his new bride Angel—that is, Angelique (Annie Farge), a French woman who had just moved to America.

She was pretty, strong-willed and new to the ways of the USA; her earnest attempts to fit into suburban Los Angeles culture was the basis for the comedy—much as Cuban-born Ricky's mangling of the English language generated laughs on *Lucy*.

Doris Singleton and Don Keefer played neighbours and friends Susie and George, whose bitter banter toward each other was not unlike *Lucy's* Fred and Ethel Mertz. In its review of the series, *Time* magazine accurately noted "although the assembly line may soon run the ignorant-immigrant theme into the ground...Farge triumphantly resists being merely Lucille Ball with a French accent. She is easily the brightest newcomer to situation comedy—small, pert, winsome, and somehow giving the impression of being attractively feathered."

But up against ABC's new family comedy *My Three Sons* and NBC's *Bachelor Father*, not enough viewers gave *Angel* a chance and CBS gave up after just one season. Thompson went on to star in the adventure series *Daktari* and appeared in other TV and film roles until his death in 1992. The French-born Farge made guest appearances on several other series before she apparently retired from show business in the mid-1960's.



Angie - 1979



Donna Pescow, who gained fame as John Travolta's girlfriend in *Saturday Night Fever*, starred in this opposites attract sitcom. Pescow was Angie Falco, a blue-collar gal working as a waitress in a Philadelphia coffee shop. She began dating customer Bradley Benson (Robert Hays), whom she thought was a struggling student. Far from it: Bradley was a successful paediatrician from one of the city's wealthiest families.

Angie's side of the family included her divorced mother Theresa (Doris Roberts), and younger sister Marie (Debralee Scott). Brad had his stuffy father Randall (John Randolph) and his overbearing sister Joyce (Sharon Spelman) to contend with. But Angie and Brad had support from Joyce's daughter Hilary (Tammy Lauren).

Naturally, the differences in cash and social class became comic fodder, helping *Angie* to become an instant hit as a mid-season replacement following *Mork and Mindy* on Thursday nights. It ended its first season as the fifth most-popular series on television, giving ABC a clean sweep of the top five that year, with *Laverne & Shirley* in first place, *Three's Company* second, and *Mork and Mindy* tied for third with its parent *Happy Days*.

In Season Two, Angie and Theresa ran their own beauty parlour, and Brad and Angie tried to settle in as newlyweds. The sharp comedy that marked the first season was softened—and not for the better; combined with a time slot change, ratings fell drastically, and the series was cancelled. Angie's theme song, *Different Worlds*, was performed over the opening credits by singer Maureen McGovern and became a top-20 hit in 1979.

Pescow moved on to other television roles; Hays became known for his work in the 1980 film comedy *Airplane!* and its sequel; and Doris Roberts would win Emmys playing another meddling mom—Marie Barone on *Everybody Loves Raymond*.

Mike's Reviews A - Z

Apple's Way - 1974



The man who created *The Waltons*, Earl Hammer Junior, tried his hand with another family drama set in contemporary

times. Premiering as a mid-season replacement in January 1974, *Apple's Way* was the story of George Apple (Ronny Cox), a successful architect who was tired of big city life (Los Angeles, that is) and moved his family to the small rural community of Appleton, Iowa. (The town was founded by George's ancestors.)

Wife Barbara (Lee McCain) took to her new surroundings just fine, but it proved to be a big adjustment for the couple's four children Paul (Vincent Van Patten), Cathy (Patti Cohoon), Patricia (Franny Michel; replaced in the second season by Kristy McNichol) and Steven (Eric Olson). Malcolm Atterbury played grandfather Aldon, who lived with the family.

Every week, the Apples (especially George) became involved in various causes around the small town, which inevitably led to conflict with both townsfolk and other family members. But while the Depression-era setting of *The Waltons* drew millions of fans every week, the plots and resolutions of *Apple's Way* seemed rather hokey and synthetic—especially in the Me Decade. Viewers found it much easier to switch the channel to NBC and enjoy *The Wonderful World of Disney*. CBS ended the Apple's saga in January 1975.

Bachelor Father - 1957



John Forsythe starred in this hybrid sitcom about a single man who became an instant father after taking in his niece.

Forsythe played Bentley Gregg, a successful Beverly Hills attorney who adopted teenager Kelly (Noreen Corcoran) after her

parents died in a car accident. Bentley's time was divided between raising Kelly and his career—not to mention the many beautiful women who stopped by his office. (In one episode, a girlfriend of Kelly's became smitten with the older Gregg. She was played by Linda Evans, who would later become Krystal Carrington of *Dynasty*—and Forsythe's on-screen wife—two decades later.)

Sammy Tong played Bentley's houseboy Peter Tong, who ran the household (and occasionally got into some predicament, usually over money). *Bachelor Father's* pilot first aired on CBS' *General Electric Theater* in May 1957 (with the title *A New Girl in His Life*). Four months later, the series made its debut on the network, alternating every other week with *The Jack Benny Program* on Sunday nights. In 1959, "*Father*" moved to NBC, where it ran until 1961. ABC then picked up the series for one more season, making *Bachelor Father* one of the few programmes to air original episodes on all three major U.S. networks.

During its final season, Kelly became engaged to Bentley's junior law partner Warren Dawson (Aron Kincaid); the series ended before the wedding could take place. A rather pleasant if predictable sitcom, "*Father*" was co-produced by Forsythe's production company and MCA/Universal, allowing the star to enjoy a comfortable life before *Charlie's Angels* and *Dynasty* made him a household name—again.

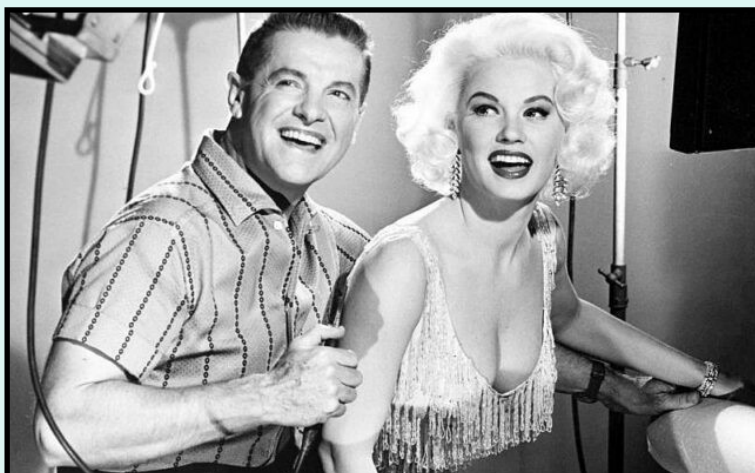
The Bob Cummings Show aka Love That Bob - 1955

This 1950's comedy starred a bachelor who pursued nearly every beautiful woman who posed for his camera. But it was all good clean fun, though in those rather repressed times, the humour was considered a bit risqué.

Bob Cummings played Bob Collins, an Air Force reserve officer who ran a successful photography studio. Veteran sitcom actress Rosemary DeCamp was his sister Margaret McDonald, who tried but failed to get him married to a "respectable" woman. She wanted Bob to set an example for her adolescent son Chuck (Dwayne Hickman)—who, not surprisingly, wanted to be like Uncle Bob and get all the girls.

At the studio, Bob had an efficient secretary named Charmaine "Schultz" Schultz (brilliantly played by Ann B. Davis), who pined for Bob even as he dated one woman after another. Another woman competed for Bob's affections - scholarly bird watcher Pamela Livingston (Nancy Kulp). Neither Schultz nor Pamela was glamorous enough for Bob. But they were far more intelligent than most of his attractive but vapid conquests.

Mike's Reviews A - Z



The Bob Cummings Show (also known as *Love That Bob*) was created by Paul Henning, a writer who would later develop such rural sitcoms as *The Beverly Hillbillies*, *Petticoat Junction* and *Green Acres* for CBS.

The show itself was produced by Henning, Cummings and George Burns' McCadden Productions. It premiered in January 1955 on NBC as one of television's first mid-season replacement series. CBS then picked up "*Bob Cummings*" for two seasons, before NBC took back the show and aired it until 1959.

After the series ended, Dwayne Hickman starred in *The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis* (and later became a CBS television executive). Davis, who won two Emmy awards for her role as Schulzy, went on to her best-known role as Alice Nelson, *The Brady Bunch's* wisecracking maid. And Henning would tap Kulp to play no-nonsense bank secretary Jane Hathaway on *Beverly Hillbillies*.

Bob Cummings was a film actor before moving to television in the early 1950's with the sitcom *My Hero*. He won an Emmy for the live 1954 production of *Twelve Angry Men* on CBS' *Studio One*. Cummings appeared in several other films, along with an instalment of *The Lucille Ball-Desi Arnaz Comedy Hour* and the short-lived sitcoms *The New Bob Cummings Show* and *My Living Doll*. He died at the age of 80 in 1990.

Charles in Charge - 1984

Scott Baio became a TV heartthrob on both *Happy Days* and its spin-off series *Joanie Loves Chachi*. He was able to grow up a bit on this pleasant if predictable sitcom.



Baio starred as Charles (his last name was never revealed), a 19-year-old student at New Jersey's Copeland College who also worked as a live-in babysitter for the Pembroke family. In exchange for room and board, plus some spending money, Charles cared for the three Pembroke children, pre-teen Lila (April Lerman), sarcastic 12-year-old Douglas (Jonathan Ward), and youngest son Jason (Michael Pearlman). Julie Cobb and James Widdoes played busy parents Jill and Stan; Charles' best friend was somewhat dense and girl-crazy Buddy Lembeck (Willie Ames); Jennifer Runyon played co-ed Gwendolyn Pierce, whom Charles had a crush on.

CBS cancelled the series after one low-rated season—but nearly two years later, *Charles in Charge* returned with new episodes for local stations eager for fresh sitcoms.

When the syndicated version began in January 1987, the Pembrokes had moved to Seattle and sold their home to a new family—the Powells. Grandfather Walter Powell, (James T. Callahan) was a retired Navy Man and headed the household. Sandra Kerns played his daughter-in-law Ellen (her husband was a Navy commander stationed in the South Seas). She had three children—daughters Jamie and Sarah (Nicole Eggert and Josie Davis) and son Adam (Alexander Polinsky).

Only Baio and Ames carried over from the CBS version: Charles was still caretaker and college student; while Buddy was as girl-crazy as ever. During the syndicated run, Ellen Travolta (sister of John) played Charles' mother Lillian (again, no last name), who owned a pizza parlour and meddled in Charles' life.

The series ended in late 1990 with Charles being accepted to Princeton University. The show's catchy theme song (Charles in charge of our days and our nights...I want Charles in charge of me!) was written by David Kurtz, Michael Jacobs and Al Burton, and performed by Shandi Sinnamon.

In 2003 Mike paid tribute to two Buddys...

Buddy Hackett



He could hit you hard in the funny bone. He could shock you with a blue joke. But there was one thing comedian Buddy Hackett could never do: He could never bore you.

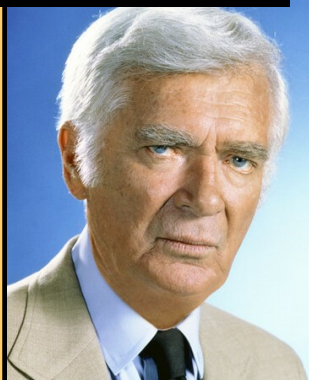
The 78-year-old Hackett, who died in May 2003 at his Southern California home, was a product of the so-called "Borscht Circuit"-a comic who performed in the Catskill Mountains for New York visitors. By the 1950's, Hackett appeared on many a stage and various television variety shows of the day. But Hackett had only a handful of regular roles on TV. He was the star of his own situation comedy, "Stanley". It aired live on NBC from 1956 until 1957. Hackett played the title role, the owner of a newspaper stand in an upscale New York City hotel.

Also heard but not seen on the series was a younger Paul Lynde, who barked orders to the staff as the hotel's owner. Stanley's love interest was Celia, played by a relative newcomer who would soon make her own mark in show business-Carol Burnett.

Hackett's last regular role on TV was on the critically acclaimed but low-rated comedy about the Hollywood show business world, "Action". (He played a limo driver on the 1999 Fox series.) But if I had a favourite Buddy Hackett role, it would be his portrayal of comic Lou Costello in the 1978 TV movie "Bud and Lou", which co-starred Harvey Korman as partner Bud Abbott. Hackett not only caught the essence of Costello's comedy; he also captured the despair of the comedian's personal life, bringing a necessary dark element to the film. The best comics have always gone a step beyond the chuckles.

You can place Buddy Hackett in that pantheon of comic greats.

Buddy Ebsen



The old saying about one door closing and another opening certainly applied to the long and successful career of 95-year-old Buddy Ebsen, who died July 6th, 2003 of respiratory failure in Torrance, California.

A dancer who performed with his sister in films, the former Christian Rudolph Ebsen traded taps with young Shirley Temple and moved on to dramatic work in such films as "Breakfast at Tiffany's". (Ebsen's best-known role that never materialized was as the Tin Man in the classic "The Wizard of Oz". An allergic reaction to the aluminium makeup caused Ebsen to drop out after ten days of filming; Jack Haley replaced him.)

But it was television that brought Buddy Ebsen tremendous fame. In 1954, he played George Russel, the sidekick to Fess Parker's Davy Crockett, on the ABC anthology "Disneyland". (Ebsen wanted the Crockett role, but settled for best buddy.) "Crockett" ran for five episodes, and was possibly one of the earliest forms of what is now known as the "miniseries". In 1955, just about every kid wanted a coonskin cap and could sing the theme song by heart. ("Davy...Davy Crockett/King Of The Wild Frontier").

Ebsen's best-known role came in 1962, when he reluctantly agreed to play poor backwoodsman turned tycoon Jed Clampett on "The Beverly Hillbillies". Critics tore the show apart, but it was Ebsen's easy-going style and down-home sensibility that kept the show grounded, allowing his co-stars to take off in their own unusual worlds. Viewers liked that mixture; "Hillbillies" was America's top-rated series for its first two seasons and enjoyed a nine-year run.

In 1973, Ebsen returned to series television with "Barnaby Jones", as a retired detective who returns to work with the help of his daughter-in-law, played by former Miss America Lee Meriwhether. Again, Ebsen's charm carried the show (Meriwhether wasn't half-bad either); despite its violent plots, "Barnaby Jones" was on the air until 1980. In later years, Ebsen acted occasionally (he was a regular guest on the mid-1980's ABC detective drama "Matt Houston") and turned author with two books--the autobiography "The Other Side of Oz" and a novel entitled "Kelly's Quest".

Likeability is a key to television success, and Ebsen had that charisma in spades, which ensured his longevity on the small screen.

After all, it was no accident that his nickname was "Buddy".

Mike's Reviews A - Z

December Bride - 1954



The old mother-in-law joke was turned upside down in this sitcom, which began on radio in 1952 and made the move to television two years later.

Veteran character actress Spring Byington played Lily Ruskin, a vital widow always looking for a suitable man; she was based on creator Parke Levy's own mother-in-law. Lily got along well with her son Matt Henshaw (Dean Miller) and her daughter-in-law Ruth (Francis Rafferty). Her best friend was outspoken Hilda Croker (Verna Feldon); Lily and Hilda would get into a number of unusual situations.

Also on hand was Lily's next-door-neighbour Pete Porter (Harry Morgan), who didn't like HIS own mother-in-law, and complained often about his never-seen wife Gladys. Because it was jointly produced by Desilu and CBS, *December Bride* won the coveted time slot behind *I Love Lucy* on Monday nights, and became a solid top-ten series. It ran for five seasons, but the character of Pete Porter was popular enough to launch a separate series.

Pete & Gladys starred Morgan with Cara Williams as Gladys, a scatterbrained but earnest woman. Verna Feldon and Francis Rafferty were occasional regulars on the show, which ran from 1960 through 1962. Morgan would later go on to television fame as Officer Bill Gannon on *Dragnet* (1967-70) and Colonel Sherman Potter in *M*A*S*H*.

The Dinah Shore Show / Dinah Shore Chevy Show - 1951



Dinah Shore was one of the few women who headlined her own variety series on American television in the 1950's. And for good reason. She was beautiful, had a distinctive vocal style, was always generous to her many guests, and like her TV contemporary Perry Como, her relaxed presence made for pleasant viewing. It's no wonder when she sang her sponsor's jingle, "*See The U.S.A. In Your Chevrolet*," even die-hard Ford owners couldn't help but join her.

Dinah Shore had long been a familiar singer and actress to Americans; she easily made the transition to the new medium.

Starting in November 1951, Shore starred in a 15-minute live show that aired before NBC's *Camel News Caravan* on Tuesday and Thursday nights. She sang a few songs, had an occasional guest star and featured such vocal acts as The Notables and The Skylarks.

The Dinah Shore Show was loved by critics; Jack Gould of "*The New York Times*" noted Shore "was the picture of naturalness and conducted her show with a disarming combination of authority and humility."

By the fall of 1956, Dinah's 15-minute show was reduced to just Thursday evenings—not because she was cancelled by the network. NBC gave Shore an entire hour in prime time, now known as *The Dinah Shore Chevy Show*, every Friday night.

After one season, the 15-minute show was dropped for good, and the "*Chevy Show*" moved to Sundays, where she held her own against the Western craze of the period. Shore remained the charming hostess, with the longer format giving her more of a showcase for her songs and interactions with a long list of guest stars.

Dinah continued to sing the praises of her car maker sponsor (sometimes in elaborate filmed musical numbers), and ended each show by giving the audience a great big kiss—MUAH!. Chevrolet's long relationship with Dinah Shore ended in the fall of 1961, when her series moved back to Fridays (alternating every other week with the prestigious *Bell Telephone Hour*).

In the fall of 1962, the series—now known as *The Dinah Shore Show*—alternated with *The DuPont Show of The Week* on Sundays. Shore herself won four Emmy awards for her television work, but her series ended its run on May 12th, 1963. She went on to host a number of specials, then became a staple of daytime television with musical/variety/interview programmes such as *Dinah!* and *Dinah's Place*. And remained the attractive, talented and gracious woman she always was—right up to her death from ovarian cancer in February 1994.

Mike's Reviews A - Z

Fibber McGee and Molly - 1959



In the early days of television, America often "raided" radio for its best material to transfer it from the microphone to the camera. In a number of cases this proved a winning formula. One of the most popular radio shows of all time was *Fibber McGee and Molly*.

Fibber was so called because of his tendency not so much to lie, but to exaggerate greatly. Most of the times he'd come up with hare-brained schemes (like digging an oil well in the back yard) only to come back down to Earth with a bump. Fortunately for him his adoring wife Molly was always there to catch him and soften the fall.

The radio series had a number of running gags such as Fibber's inability to tell a joke which was often followed by Molly's reprimand "T'ain't funny, McGee!" The line found its way into popular culture during the 1940s. The most enduring gag was The Closet - Fibber's closet was often opened to a loud cacophonous clatter of bric-a-brac as it rained down over his head. "I gotta get that closet cleaned out one of these days" was the observation once the racket subsided. "Fibber McGee's closet" became another popular catchphrase - this one synonymous with household clutter.

Real-life married couple Jim and Marian Jordan played the leads but when it came to making the TV show NBC decided to recast. With younger actors Bob Sweeney and Cathy Lewis in the roles the series was launched on September 15, 1959. Very few of the actors in the TV series had had any part in the radio version.

Fibber McGee and Molly, the TV version, completely failed to hit it off with the American public. Even the closet joke was not as funny when you saw it as when you heard it. With the TV series seemingly unable to recreate the flavour and humour of the original radio version *Fibber McGee and Molly* failed to limp on for an entire season and was cancelled by mid January 1960.

The Gabby Hayes Show - 1950



After playing the scruffy sidekick to numerous Western heroes including Randolph Scott, Hopalong Cassidy, Gene Autry, Roy Rogers and John Wayne, Gabby Hayes was rewarded with his own television series in 1950.

Hayes, who looked every inch the typical cowboy was in fact born in New York and didn't even learn to ride a horse until he was in his forties, and later admitted he hadn't even been a particular fan of the genre. Nonetheless he became a popular performer and consistently appeared among the ten favourite actors in polls

taken of movie-goers of the period. He was closely associated with what eventually became clichéd Western phrases such as "yer durn tootin'", "dadgumit", and "young whippersnapper."

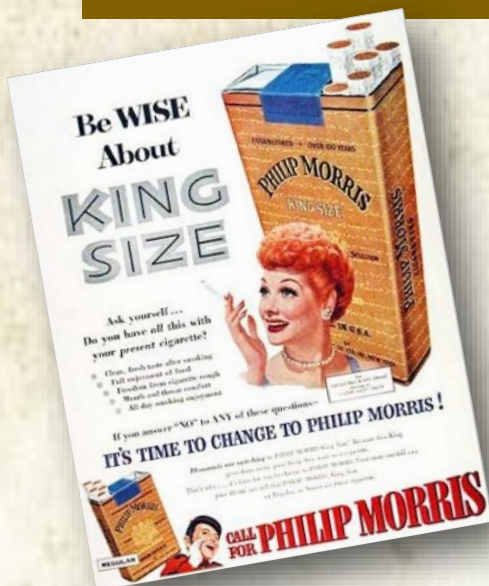
In 1974, Mel Brooks paid homage to Hayes by creating a lookalike character (played by Claude Ennis Starrett) named Gabby Johnson in the Western spoof *Blazing Saddles*.

Hayes retired from the movies in the late 1940s and hosted *The Gabby Hayes Show* on television, although he did not appear as a participating character. Instead, Hayes introduced the show telling tales of the Old West, illustrating his dissertations with film clips from various cowboy movies.

The first series, which ran from 1950 - 1954, was shown on NBC and had a running time of just fifteen minutes. The second series (1956) on ABC was a half-hour broadcast on Saturday mornings. When the second series finally ended George 'Gabby' Hayes retired from showbiz. He passed away the following year.

In 2006 Mike indulged in his love of television history

When Stars Did the Spots: Celebrity Commercials in TV's Golden Age



Stars in the early years of American television had no qualms about putting in a good word for the folks who paid their bills every week.

America was the first country to use sponsor-funded programming as its model for both radio and television. In the early days of radio, one single company (through its advertising agency) would pay for the production every week, and the sponsor's products would be pitched to the audience. That workable blueprint was used for television, and continued to be the norm for over a decade.

During the golden days of U.S. radio, you could link the star to the sponsor: Jack Benny for Jello; Fred Allen for Ipana toothpaste; Edgar Bergen and his "dummies" Charlie McCarthy and Mortimer Snerd for Chase & Sanborn coffee. When American television geared up for an all-out push after World War II,

Singer sponsored drama in 'Four Star Playhouse' which gave an early appearance for Natalie Wood. Viewers of what was called television's "Golden Age" were well-aware that Milton Berle helped sell gasoline. (Not surprisingly, his NBC variety show was called "The Texaco Star Theater.") George Burns and Gracie Allen's fans knew that dairy company Carnation sponsored their television show; major companies such as Westinghouse, General Electric and U.S. Steel sponsored high-brow dramatic anthologies to burnish their images as thoughtful, enlightened corporations; and soap makers such as Colgate-Palmolive, Lever Brothers (now Unilever) and Proctor & Gamble invested in daytime dramas (soap operas) and game shows. Kellogg's cereals were pitched by the human stars of "The Adventures of Superman," and animated characters that included Huckleberry Hound, Yogi Bear and Woody Woodpecker. Rival General Mills countered with the now-classic "Rocky & Bullwinkle;" General Foods' Post cereals were pitched by such stars as Danny Thomas and Andy Griffith.



Yes, the stars (and sometimes the cast) did the pitch.

Bea Benaderet pours a can of Carnation Evaporated Milk for Gracie Allen in the 1950s - the ads were incorporated into the scripts. It was not unusual to have announcer Harry Von Zell come into the middle of the action on "Burns & Allen," and ever-so-subtly put in a good word for the economy and versatility of Carnation Evaporated Milk. On "The Pepsi-Cola Playhouse,"

actress Polly Bergen would sing the soft drink maker's jingle: "Pepsi-Cola's up to date/With modern folks who watch their weight/We made it light/light for you/Refreshes without filling too!" And Dinah Shore would urge her viewers to "See the U.S.A. in your Chevrolet," telling them how the "ride is sweeter" in a new Bel Air hardtop with Chevy's powerful small-block V-8 (mated to a two-speed Powerglide automatic transmission, both at extra cost). Even into the 1960's, it was not unusual to see Andy Griffith (as Sheriff Andy Taylor) discuss the "outstanding" taste of Sanka coffee or how Post Grape Nuts "fills you up, not out." On "The Dick Van Dyke Show," cast members would do similar spots for their sponsors, as did the leads on "The Beverly Hillbillies." The cast of "My Three Sons" usually had a minute-long family crisis surrounding sponsor Hunts Catsup. When Lucille Ball returned to television on "The Lucy Show" in 1962, she did not shill for the sponsor; co-star Vivian Vance and the actors who played their children made extra money promoting Jell-O pudding and Swan dishwashing liquid.

When Stars Did the Spots: Celebrity Commercials in TV's Golden Age



More than any other personality of the period, it was Arthur Godfrey who proved to be the most effective salesman—on both television and radio. Godfrey had no major talents to speak of; his CBS shows (“Arthur Godfrey’s Talent Scouts” and “Arthur Godfrey And His Friends”) were basically Godfrey as host introducing new acts (on “Talent Scouts”) or featuring a “family” of performers (“Friends”). What set Godfrey apart was his “barefoot voice”—one perfectly suited for broadcasting. Listeners loved it. They also loved when Godfrey threw out the commercial script and began ad-libbing about the product’s attributes. In another person’s hand it would have been a disaster. Godfrey pulled it off with aplomb; especially for his best-known sponsor, Lipton Tea:

“Aw, who wrote this stuff? Everybody knows Lipton’s is the best tea you can buy. So why get fancy about it? Getcha some Lipton’s, hot the pot with plain hot water for a few minutes, then put fresh hot water on the tea and let it just sit there.”

CBS Chairman Bill Paley reportedly hated Godfrey, but couldn’t deny the millions of dollars his shows were generating for the network. Unfortunately the success went to Godfrey’s head; his behind-the-scenes arrogance with staff and talent came to a public head in October 1953, when he fired the increasingly popular singer Julius La Rosa from his morning radio show. La Rosa committed the sin of obtaining his own agent and challenging Godfrey’s strict policies. Godfrey later claimed La Rosa “lacked humility” but the public felt it was Godfrey who was acting petty because La Rosa was gaining his own following. Within two years, Godfrey’s two TV shows fell out of the top ten; by 1959 he was confined for the most part to radio, where he remained until his retirement in 1972. He died more than a decade later, virtually unknown to a new generation of television viewers.

There was plenty of self-censorship and orders by advertisers to the producers, writers and stars of the shows they paid for. A line in one series mentioning New York’s Chrysler Building was removed because the show was sponsored by a rival automaker; a child could not refuse to eat cereal for breakfast because the show was sponsored by a major cereal maker; Mars forbade writers to mention ice cream, cake and other sweet treats that seemingly competed with its candy bars; and the producers who adapted the Rudyard Kipling play “The Light That Failed” had to change the title to “The Gathering Light” because the show’s electric company sponsor forbid any light to fail! Other examples included writer Reginald Rose’s story “Thunder On Sycamore Street,” which dealt with a black family moving into an all-white neighbourhood. The sponsor, fearful of repercussions from white viewers, forced Rose to make the new neighbour an ex-convict. In 1959, CBS’ “Playhouse 90” aired the play “Judgement At Nuremberg,” but a line referring to the execution of Jews during World War II in “gas ovens” was bleeped out in the live performance. The deletion was made at the request of the anthology series’ sponsor, the American Gas Association. (The AGA defended the move by pointing out that the Nazis used cyanide gas to execute the Jews during World War II, not natural gas.)



Betty Furness told US viewers, 'You can be sure if it's Westinghouse.'

When Stars Did the Spots: Celebrity Commercials in TV's Golden Age

Speaking of "I Love Lucy," as noted, the nation's most popular show was sponsored by a cigarette maker (Philip Morris). Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz did many of the commercials; in one spot, Lucy told the audience, "You see how easy it is to keep your husband happy? Why not get him a carton of Philip Morris cigarettes?" Lucy and Desi weren't the only ones shilling for smokes during the 1950's and 60's. Jack Benny and the cast of "Your Hit Parade" extolled the virtues of Lucky Strikes ("So round, so firm, so fully packed...so free and easy on the draw"); Joey Bishop and the cast of "The Dick Van Dyke Show" did spots for Newport and Kent cigarettes respectively; the "Beverly Hillbillies" cast also promoted Winston (the show's alternate sponsor with Kellogg's Corn Flakes). Jack Webb smoked Chesterfields for his "Dragnet" sponsor; and both "Topper" and "You'll Never Get Rich/The Phil Silvers Show" were sponsored by Camel with the respective stars doing the sales pitch.

Would you believe that a cartoon show was sponsored by a tobacco maker? True. When "The Flintstones" premiered in 1960, ABC promoted the stone-age family as an "adult" cartoon. So the network found grown-up sponsors in Miles Laboratories (who made One-A-Day vitamins and Alka-Seltzer) and R.J.Reynolds Tobacco—the makers of Winston. Fred Flintstone and Barney Rubble not only pitched vitamins and antacid, they sold the public on filter smoking.



An infamous commercial during the show's first season showed Fred & Barney hiding from Wilma and Betty (who wanted to help with the housework). The pair decide to have a "Winston Break" behind the house, but are caught by the wives before Fred delivers the slogan "Winston tastes good like a cigarette should." You can find the now-infamous commercial reproduced on various video collections or on YouTube

Unfortunately, the days of one advertiser for every show became so expensive, only the largest companies could afford the format. In the early 1950's, NBC's innovative president Pat Weaver launched the so-called "magazine" sponsorship, where several different firms bought time on a single show. In return, the network picked up the costs of the show and the stars. The format was a tremendous success; by 1960, most television shows had multiple sponsors.

These days, there has been a lot of talk about "product placement," especially on the reality shows. The designers on "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition" are seen every week buying products at Sears, the show's major sponsor. "The Apprentice" has featured competitions with products such as Crest toothpaste and The Home Depot. Even scripted shows have gotten into the act; a first-season episode of "Desperate Housewives" featured one of the "housewives" getting a job showing the Buick LaCrosse sedan at a shopping mall. Subtle messages? You decide. But it was nice to know that once upon a time, you knew when the commercial pitch ended and the television entertainment began. And if there were stars in the eyes of the actors who also put in a good word for their sponsor, it was a small price to pay for a little of your time.

Mike's Reviews A - Z

The Gene Autry Show - 1950



After thirteen years as a singing cowboy on radio and the movies, Autry, largely due to the success of *Hopalong Cassidy*, started turning out weekly television adventures by the wagonload.

Discovered by film producer Nat Levine in 1934, Orvon Grover Autry made his film debut for Mascot Pictures Corp. in *In Old Santa Fe*. Autry went on to make 44 B-movie Western films up to 1940, all in which he played under his own name, riding his trusty stallion, Champion. His television films began broadcasting in 1947 but original made-for-television episodes didn't appear until July 1950. These ran until 1956.

Autry's role changed almost weekly from rancher, to ranch hand, to sheriff, to border agent. Pat Buttram supplied comic relief as Autry's sidekick, Pat - later to become familiar to the next generation of television viewers as Mr Haney on *Green Acres*.

Alan Hale, Jr. - aka The Skipper from *Gilligan's Island* - played a bad guy in several episodes but he also played Gene's sidekick, Tiny, in two episodes of Season 1. Autry's horse won fame in his own right - getting a TV series; *The Adventures of Champion* from 1955 to 1956. Timeless Media Group released the first four seasons of fully restored and uncut episodes on DVD in Region 1.

Hank - 1965



This sitcom starred Dick Kallman as Hank Dearborn, a teenager who was left to care for his younger sister Tina (Katie Sweet) after their parents were killed in a car accident. To earn a living, Hank decided to take classes at fictional Western University. Of course, having no money, Hank resorted to "auditing" courses—finding out who didn't show up and posing as that person through elaborate means (which would be considered identity theft today).

Dr. Lewis Royal (Howard St. John) was the registrar at Western, who was on the hunt for the young man auditing classes—not realizing the culprit, Hank, was dating his daughter Doris (Linda Foster). Moreover, the college's track coach spots

Hank racing to class, and invites him to join the track team. Every week, Hank was forced to stay a step ahead of Dr. Royal and social workers who could take Tina away to foster care.

Hank had a small but loyal following—too small for NBC, which canceled the series after one season. But in an unusual move, the network allowed "Hank's" producers to tie up loose ends in the series finale: Hank was finally caught posing as an absent student, but because he did so well on a recent exam, Western University offered Hank a full scholarship. The final scene had Tina remarking "There goes my brother—the registered student."

Hank's theme song lyrics were written by none other than Johnny Mercer! Dick Kallman was one of a number of promising performers hand-picked by Lucille Ball for her "Desilu Workshop," a project motivated in part to keep her mind off her upcoming divorce from Desi Arnaz. The young actors were featured in a Christmas special on Westinghouse Desilu Playhouse in 1959. Kallman went on to a moderately successful music and stage career before he was murdered inside his New York City apartment in 1980.

Mike's Reviews A - Z

The Hathaways - 1961



This was considered a family sitcom—if you stretched the definition of “family” to include two humans and their three chimpanzees.

Jack Weston was real estate agent Walter Hathaway; Peggy Cass his wife Elinore—who was the booker to their trio of chimps Candy, Charlie and Enoch. Elinore treated the chimps as real children, which always worried Walter (did she care more about the chimps than him?).

Watching TV authors Harry Castleman and Walter Podrazik called *The Hathaways* “possibly the worst series ever to air on network TV...utterly degrading...total worthlessness.” Ratings were so low, ABC found only one sponsor—cereal and pet food maker Ralston Purina—willing to even sponsor half the series.

Fortunately for all involved, *The Hathaways* was cancelled after just one season. Candy, Charlie and Enoch were real performers, billed as the Marquis Chimps. They were a popular act, appearing in commercials, and on Jack Benny and Ed Sullivan's programmes—certainly more dignified settings than *The Hathaways* could offer.

He and She - 1967



Real life husband and wife Richard Benjamin and Paula Prentiss starred in this domestic/workplace comedy that was slightly ahead of its time.

Benjamin played Dick Hollister, a successful New York cartoonist who created the superhero character “Jetman,” which was turned into a television show. Veteran actor Jack Cassidy played Oscar North, who portrayed “Jetman” on the fictional series. Dick's wife, Paula (Prentiss) was an off-centre social worker whose problems also became Dick's. Kenneth Mars was the couple's fireman friend Harry Zarakardos, and Hamilton Camp played the building's superintendent Andrew Hummel.

Despite critical raves and a time slot following *Green Acres*, *He And She* was never the hit it deserved to be. One of its producers, Allan Burns, was later part of the *Mary Tyler Moore Show* team. Ironically, Cassidy turned down the part of that show's pompous newscaster Ted Baxter, saying it was too similar to his *He And She* role. CBS aired reruns of the series during the summer of 1970.

Head of the Class - 1986



This above-average high school sitcom starred Howard Hessman (who gained fame as Dr. Johnny Fever on *WKRP in Cincinnati*) as Charlie Moore, an out-of-work actor who became a substitute history teacher at Manhattan's Millard Filmore High School.

One of his classes included members of the school's Individualized Honors Program. They were a group with above-average intelligence, but they weren't so great with social skills. The IHP class included nerdy Arvid Engen (Dan Frischman); overweight and blustery Dennis Blunden (Dan Schneider); conservative Yuppie Alan Pinkard (Tony O'Dell); spoiled rich girl Darlene Merriman (Robin Givens); grounded Sarah Nevins (Kimberly Russell); overachiever Maria Borges (Leslie Bega); Indian

exchange student Jawaharlal Choudhury (Jory Husain); artist Simone Foster (Khristyne Haje); 11-year-old student Janice Lazarotto (Tannis Valley); and greaser Eric Mardian (Brian Robbins), who was intelligent despite his dislike for anything academic.

Mike's Reviews A - Z

(Head of the Class—continued) It was up to Charlie to give the IHP students street smarts, along with book smarts—much to the dismay of blustery principal Doctor Harold Samuels (William G. Shilling) and the admiration of his assistant Bernadette Meara (Jeanetta Arnette).

Head Of The Class became the first modern American entertainment series to film an entire episode in the Soviet Union (Charlie and the IHP class went to Moscow to face their Russian counterparts in an academic tournament). The show also featured the cast doing mini-musicals; once each season, the students would perform such productions as *Hair* and *Little Shop Of Horrors*.

During the show's run, Givens became a media sensation, thanks to her marriage to controversial boxer Mike Tyson. There was gradual turnover among the students; several left before the show's demise and a few new IHP members were added, including problem student T.J. Jones (Rain Pryor). Hessman also decided to leave the series after four seasons; his replacement was Scottish-born comic Billy Connolly as Billy MacGregor, who was more of a stand-up comic compared to the droll educator Charlie Moore was.

The series ended its five-season run with the remaining IHP students graduating from Filmore High, which was waiting to be demolished. Dan Schneider (who played Dennis Blunden) went on to produce and write a string of successful teen sitcoms on the Nickelodeon cable channel, including *iCarly*; *The Amanda Show* and *Zoey 101*. The New York Times later called Schneider the Norman Lear of children's television. Co-star Brian Robbins also worked with Schneider, and later produced such network series as *Smallville* and *One Tree Hill*.

The Hollywood Palace - 1964



This old-fashioned variety hour was ABC's answer to CBS' long-running *Ed Sullivan Show*.

Unlike Sullivan, there was no permanent host; a guest star assumed the hosting duties every week and introduced a variety of acts from singers and dancers to acrobats and stand-up comics. *The Hollywood Palace* was born from the failed rubble of *The Jerry Lewis Show*. The comic's expensive and live two-hour series was quickly panned by critics and shunned by audiences. After ABC bought out Lewis' contract at the end of 1963, it was still stuck with the old El Capitan

Theater in Hollywood that was home base for Lewis' show. Network

executives decided to use the theatre for an hour-long variety show. Bing Crosby was the first star who agreed to host; he would assume the duty 31 times during the "*Palace's*" run. Other guest hosts included such names as Milton Berle, Dean Martin, Judy Garland, Jimmy Durante and even stars of ABC series such as Elizabeth Montgomery of *Bewitched*.

The Hollywood Palace was structured much like the live vaudeville shows that were popular in the early years of the 20th century even down to having an attractive woman come out and present a card that introduced the next act to audiences. One of the early "card girls" was a shapely actress named Raquel Welch.

The Hollywood Palace also introduced some popular musical acts to viewers. The Rolling Stones, for instance, made their first American appearance on "Palace;" when they were featured in a June 1964 telecast, guest host Dean Martin mocked them on the air. Martin's comments were deleted when the "*Palace*" episode was later repeated. But there was no mocking the Jackson 5 (fronted by a young and obviously talented Michael Jackson) when they made their national TV debut on "*Palace*" in October 1969.

As was the case with many ABC programmes of the period, *The Hollywood Palace* aired in black and white; it would not broadcast in colour until the fall of 1965. (Sullivan's show also switched to tint around the same time.) Crosby hosted the last instalment of *The Hollywood Palace*; the February 7th, 1970 "clip episode" featured the best moments from the show's run. One year later, CBS would give the axe to Ed Sullivan after 23 years anchoring Sunday nights. The demise of both vaudeville-style variety shows marked the end of an era in American television.

In 2002 Mike wrote about breaking gay stereotypes on US TV

Queer in Living Colour: A History of Gays and Lesbians on American Television

(DISCLAIMER: This article is written from the viewpoint of an openly gay man whose first TV crush was David Cassidy during the "Partridge Family" years, and who somehow related to Uncle Arthur on "Bewitched". Still, I have tried hard to be balanced; I will let the reader decide whether or not I was successful.)

There's no doubt that gay men and lesbians have made significant strides toward a place on American television. Although there is a significant segment of the US population that believes homosexuality is wrong and should not be depicted at all, much less in a positive manner, the last few decades have seen the opposite result. That's largely because of efforts by gay rights groups, who have pressured producers and networks to offer a more realistic view of gay men and women. In the long run, that pressure paid off--but it also had a negative effect in some respects.

Milton Berle may have worn a dress on his ground-breaking variety series in the early 1950's, but he wasn't gay and it was pure camp that never failed to get a laugh from the TV and studio audience. When television began in the late 1940's and early 1950's in the US, homosexuality was a taboo subject in most popular entertainment. Sure, you could hint that a certain effeminate male character was a bit "light in the loafers" or speculate why that spinster never settled down with a man in a decade where marriage and "family togetherness" was almost a religion. Homosexuality, if it was referred to, was spoken in code and never overtly displayed on the new medium. In fact, except for a few documentary shows, there were virtually no references or depictions of same-sex relationships or gay characters in the 1950's and 1960's. One of the few exceptions came from the late, brilliant comedian Ernie Kovacs. His occasional character of Percy Dovetonsils, an effeminate, lispng poet whose manners never failed to get laughs from the audience. (Other examples include the flamboyant Uncle Arthur, played by the late actor Paul Lynde; and Alan Sues' nelly sports-caster with his omnipresent bell on "Rowan & Martin's Laugh-In.")

Most historians point to the June 1969 "Stonewall Riots" as the turning point for what was then called the "gay liberation movement" in the United States. New York City police, in its ongoing effort to harass homosexuals, raided the "Stonewall Inn" gay bar. Instead of going peacefully, the patrons began resisting arrest and turned against the arresting officers. The action empowered gay leaders to call for equal rights, at a time

when the anti-war, civil rights and feminist movements began taking hold.

Starting in the early 1970's, a new effort was made to show gay men and lesbians on mainstream television series. Surprisingly in the US, it was not drama that gave gays increased visibility--it was the situation comedy format.

The ground-breaking "All In The Family" provided one of the earliest examples; the show's first season in 1971 showed bigoted Archie Bunker making cracks about a seemingly effeminate friend of son-in-law Mike, who displayed the stereotypical signs of homosexuality. But Archie gets a real shock when he learns that his macho, former pro football



Ernie Kovacs as Percy Dovetonsils



Laugh-In's Alan Sues

playing beer-buddy was a "friend of Dorothy". From that point on, the macho gay man became a staple for a laugh in many a sitcom--just like Milton Berle in a dress. (Producer Norman Lear, the man behind "All In The Family", also brought Americans the first gay couple in a series--George and Gordon, older "significant others" on ABC's short-lived 1975 adult comedy "Hot L Baltimore")

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"Family" also had an impact on Archie Bunker's favourite president, Richard Nixon. According to tapes from May 13th, 1971, Nixon told his aides after watching an episode of the comedy that "Archie is sitting here with his hippie son-in-law, married to the screwball daughter...the son-in-law apparently goes both ways....The point that I make is that, goddamn it, I do not think you glorify on public television homosexuality....I do not want to see this country go that way." (For the record, son-in-law Mike was not bisexual.)

Not long after, "The Mary Tyler Moore Show" aired an episode where neighbour Phyllis tried to get Mary's best friend Rhoda interested in her brother. But the blind date didn't work out, and near the end of the show, an angry Phyllis confronted Rhoda, asking her why her brother wasn't good enough. Rhoda's simple answer: "He's gay!" (The surprise gay character also became a television staple.) In 1972, ABC broke new ground with the short-lived sitcom "The Corner Bar", which was set in a New York City tavern. Actor Vincent Schiavelli (pictured above) portrayed a flamboyant set designer named "Peter Panama"--who became the first openly gay character to appear on a regular basis in a US television series.

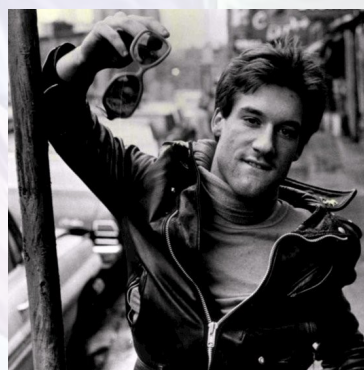
Meanwhile, dramas began dealing with gay and lesbian characters (usually as a one-shot topic for the week). In 1972, ABC made a bold move by airing the made-for-television film "That Certain Summer"--the story of a teenage boy who eventually learns his father is gay, and lives with another man. It was a well-done movie that earned critical acclaim and good ratings. Near the end of the film, the father tells his son that "A lot of people think (homosexuality is) wrong. They say it's a sickness....if I had a choice, it's not something I'd pick for

myself". That line of self-loathing was ordered by the network, to appease those opposed to homosexuality. Still, "That Certain Summer" gave gays new legitimacy on television by



just being depicted on the small screen.

1973 brought America a real-life look at a real-life homosexual: "An American Family", the ground-breaking PBS documentary about the Louds of Southern California became notable for two developments. Parents Pat and Bill Loud's marriage deteriorated before television audiences, and son Lance came out to his family. Lance Loud's revelation drew the most controversy, but brought plenty of viewers to public television. It was the first time, but not reality and



was the first the last, that

Queer in Living Colour: A History of Gays and Lesbians on American Television



be seen in bed with each other. (One exception: The sexually-oriented sitcom "Three's Company", the US offspring of Britain's "Man About The House". Lead male character Jack Tripper pretended to be gay so he could live with two women; the show was essentially a bedroom farce.) But the GMTF-approved characters and situations led to one-sided, "politically correct" images of homosexuality as well. In a script for a TV movie where a woman left her husband for another woman, the final scene had the woman return to her husband and tell him "It's good to be home again". The television executive who read the script wanted the line changed, noting: "Don't you realize this will offend every lesbian in America"?

With the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 and the rise of the so-called "conservative movement", groups opposed to homosexuality took on new power. Broadcast networks, fearful of boycotts and viewer backlash, initially backed off on gay characters and themes. One example was the NBC sitcom "Love Sidney". Sidney Shorr, played by Tony Randall, was to

have been the first gay character in a lead series role (and indeed, the made-for-television pilot showed Sidney as a homosexual). Conservative groups such as the "Moral Majority" forced the network to make Sidney an older, single man with no clear sexual preference. "Love, Sidney" lasted just two seasons.

More successful on its own terms was "Brothers", a sitcom about three siblings that aired on the Showtime pay cable network; Paul Regina played gay brother Cliff Waters in the series and Phillip Charles McKenzie was his flamboyant best friend Donald Maltby. Originally pitched to the broadcast networks (and rejected); "Brothers" ran for five seasons--and proved to be somewhat ahead of its time. By the early 1980's, a new factor emerged: AIDS. In the US, the first cases of the then-mysterious disease were gay men. Although several series began dealing with AIDS (most notably "St. Elsewhere") NBC was the first network to tackle the topic head-on with the 1985 television film "An Early Frost", the story of a man who comes home to tell his parents he is not only gay, but dying of AIDS. Also that same year, Laura Z. Hobson's "Consenting Adult", about a mother's relationship with her gay son, became a successful made-for-TV movie on ABC, with Marlo Thomas as the mother and Martin Sheen as the homophobic father. (Ironically, Sheen played Hal Holbrook's lover 13 years earlier in "That Certain Summer".)



Meanwhile, the growing gay rights movement became embroiled in a fight with ABC over the depiction of homosexuals on its popular medical drama "Marcus Welby, MD". In one episode, a high school teacher molested a 14-year-old boy; another episode had the good Dr. Welby assuring a man with homosexual leanings that he could be "cured" and live a "normal" life. The result was the creation of a group that eventually became known as the "Gay Media Task Force", which attempted--with considerable success--to have producers portray gays and lesbians in a positive light and to sanitize any anti-homosexual portrayal on US television. GMTF was responsible for a character change in the comedy farce "Soap": When the series began, Jody Dallas--the character played by Billy Crystal--was a stereotypical gay man who wanted to wear women's dresses and get a sex-change operation. But the show tended to make Jody the target of anti-gay jokes and slurs by some members of the cast. GMTF forced ABC and "Soap's" producers to strip Jody of some of his stereotypical behaviour. The pressure effort worked; by the end of the show's run, Jody actually had an affair with a woman and fought for custody of his child.

"Soap" was just one example of GMTF's influence; by the late 1970's, a large number of US series and TV movies had at least one occasional gay character. Virtually all were good people, rarely seen but not causing too much trouble either. But the new open attitude toward positive gay images went only so far. Two people of the same sex were not allowed to kiss, or

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As the 80's came to an end and the 90's dawned, most TV viewers (though certainly not all) accepted occasional homosexual characters on movies and series. And as cable began making its way into more homes, providing content that pushed the boundaries, the US broadcast networks began pushing the envelope as well. Some highlights of the mid and late 1980's:

"Dynasty" featured Steven Carrington (Al Corley and Jack Coleman), the gay son of family patriarch Blake Carrington (John Forsythe), who killed Steven's first lover.... An episode of "L.A. Law" featured attorney C.J. Lamb (Amanda Donohoe) kissing fellow lawyer Abby Perkins (Michelle Greene) in a parking lot; it's believed to be the first woman-to-woman kiss on US network television....An episode of ABC's drama "thirtysomething" featured secondary characters Russell Weller and Peter Montefiori in bed together, clearly after a sexual encounter; ABC ran the episode virtually without commercials because advertisers refused to sponsor it...Fox's sketch comedy "In Living Color" featured a recurring skit called "Men On....", which featured two effeminate African-American men named Blaine Edwards and Antoine Merryweather (Damon Wayans and David Allen Grier) who reviewed everything from film to art, giving a negative review to anything having to do with women and/or heterosexual behaviour.

In the 1990's, musicians such as k.d. lang, Melissa Etheridge and Elton John found out that their public coming out didn't hurt their careers. Bill Clinton became the first US president to openly seek the gay and lesbian vote; his victories in 1992 and 1996 encouraged more dialogue on such hot-button issues as gays and the military; same-sex marriages; and funding for AIDS. As the decade progressed, producers used gay themes to draw attention to their series, and most found relatively little negative feedback, allowing them to push the "pink envelope" even further.

High-profile series such as "Melrose Place"; "NYPD Blue"; "Northern Exposure" and "Friends" began featuring regular or recurring gay and lesbian characters. A "Seinfeld" episode famously implied that Jerry and best friend George were lovers. They weren't of course...not that there was anything wrong with that. "Frasier" occasionally used mistaken sexual orientation as the basis for some very funny plots. Even "The Simpsons" had its own "friend of Dorothy" in Wayland Smithers, the assistant to rich and nasty nuclear power plant owner Montgomery Burns; Smithers had an unspoken (or sometimes whispered) affection for his elderly boss. "Roseanne" generated plenty of controversy (and great ratings) when the title character kissed a lesbian. Public broadcasting seldom shied away from gay-related issues; in 1995, PBS aired a miniseries based on Armistead Maupin's classic "Tales of the City"; the programme was co-funded by Britain's Channel Four and drew record ratings for a PBS show in the US. But pressure from conservative lawmakers, who had taken over Congress, forced government-funded PBS to back down from co-producing a sequel. A second version "More Tales of the City" aired on both Channel Four and the Showtime network.



No doubt the gay-related event that caused the most controversy to date came on April 30th, 1997, when the sitcom "Ellen" aired a one-hour episode where lead character Ellen Morgan (and her real-life alter ego, Ellen DeGeneres) came out as a lesbian. In retrospect, "Ellen's" coming out was seen by some critics as a last-gasp effort to revive the show's ratings; had Ellen Morgan been a lesbian when the series began, who knows what would have happened? What DID happen was that after a series of clashes between DeGeneres and ABC, "Ellen" was yanked

from the schedule in 1998, the victim of low ratings and controversy within the gay rights movement on whether DeGeneres went too far in "politicizing" what was essentially a light-hearted sitcom. Three years later, DeGeneres tried again with "The Ellen Show", playing a gay dot-com executive who moves back in with her family; it caused far less controversy but barely lasted a season on CBS.

It wasn't the end of the gay sitcom, however.

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The same year "Ellen" was cancelled, NBC introduced audiences to "Will & Grace", the story of straight designer Grace Adler and her friendship with gay attorney Will Truman. With a strong supporting cast, snappy scripts and situations that focused on the characters instead of the sexuality, "Will & Grace" immediately caught on and remains a top-ten hit for the network, despite the fact it airs against the top-rated drama series in America, "CSI: Crime Scene

Investigation". (More about "Will & Grace" can be found on Television Heaven's review section.)

The taboo about two people of the same sex kissing each other remained on US broadcast television; it took the pay cable network Showtime to shatter that taboo with the premiere of "Queer As Folk". A hit drama in the UK about a group of relatively young and horny gay men, the US version premiered in late 1999. It was in part an act of desperation by Showtime, which needed some type of programming breakthrough against larger rival HBO, which was riding a wave of critical and popular success with such series as "The Sopranos" and "Sex & The City". "Queer" definitely broke new ground for a US series (the American version was produced by the same team who wrote the 1990's drama "Sisters"). For one thing, it was far from subtle; "Queer's" in-your-face sexual acts weren't depicted on screen, but they left little to the imagination of the viewer--even though the American version was a rather formulaic drama closer to the level of a "Melrose Place" than a "Sopranos". Still, "Queer" quickly drew more than a million viewers every week to Showtime, making it the network's highest-rated series.

The new genre of reality television also paved the way by showing real-life homosexuals with both virtues and flaws. MTV's "The Real World" began featuring gays and lesbians in "synthetic" families of young twenty-somethings who live together under one roof. The first winner of the US version of "Survivor" was a gay man; calculating Richard Hatch was the castaway Americans loved to hate in the summer of 2000. America's version of "Who Wants To Be A Millionaire" featured gay players (we knew they were gay because their partners were introduced from the audience). And this past year, the upscale arts channel Bravo featured a short-run reality series called "Gay Weddings", which showed real-life couples preparing for their ceremonies; a new series will air in 2003. All are a far cry from the Louds and "An American Family" indeed.

But there were fewer fictional gay characters in US prime time. The "Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation" (GLAAD), noted that in the fall of 2002, only six new and returning series on the major broadcast networks had regular homosexual characters--"Buffy The Vampire Slayer"; "Dawson's Creek"; "ER"; "MD's" (which has been cancelled); "NYPD Blue" and "Will & Grace". (Add to that several cable series, including "Six Feet Under"; "Oz"; "Queer As Folk" and "The Shield".) The year before, 13 broadcast series featured a recurring gay character. No one is sure why; it could likely be the usual ebb and flow regarding minorities on the tube.

The next step could well be a channel specifically aimed at the gay and lesbian audience. Canada already has such a cable network called PrideVision; but there are reports its operator is having financial troubles. For some time, there have been reports US media giant Viacom (which owns CBS, Showtime and MTV, among other properties) is moving forward with its own gay channel with the working name of "Outlet"; memos allegedly written by Viacom executives claim the new network will be launched in the spring of 2003 as a pay cable service. (If it is launched, it would likely be only on digital cable systems and the two US home satellite firms DirectTV and Dish Network.)

But does America's gay community really need its own television network? Author Paula Martinac, in a recent article for the website PlanetOut, wrote that "the plans for (Outlet) seem to be motivated mostly by greed for the disposable gay bucks the marketing surveys insist we all have".

Martinac has a point, but to be fair, that's how the broadcast media works in America. If there's a dollar to be made from specialized entertainment, someone will do it--whether it's Viacom, News Corp., General Electric, Disney, AOL Time Warner, or another company. And its success will depend on what is broadcast on the new channel. Whether output translates into more than just a few gay sitcoms or dramas, with an occasional queer dating show thrown in, remains to be seen.

Mike's Reviews A - Z

It's a Man's World - 1962



An hour-long comedy-drama now considered a cult classic, it told the story of four young men who lived on a houseboat. Wes Macauely (Glenn Corbett) was a pre-law college student who cared for his younger brother Howie (Mike Burns) after their parents were killed in a car wreck. Wes' fellow college buddy, Tom-Tom DeWitt (Ted Bessell)—who came from a wealthy family—lived with the group; by the second episode, Tom-Tom's friend Vern Hodges (Randy Boone) joined the gang on the houseboat they shared (called “The Elephant”) in the fictional college town of Cordetta. Wes was easily the most settled of the four; he worked at a gas station and had a fiancée, Irene Hoff (Jan Norris).

The stories revolved around the personalities of the four young men—Wes' struggles to make ends meet; Tom-Tom's obsession with the fast life (and fast girls); Howie's coming-of-age; and Vern's free-spirit nature and talent with a guitar.

It's A Man's World was ahead of its time in dealing with the differences between adults and youth, premarital sex, and the rise of feminism. While a minor cult favourite among college students, it could not succeed against ABC's entrenched *Cheyenne* or CBS' game show staples *To Tell The Truth* and *I've Got A Secret*.

Despite letters urging NBC to stay with the show, the network yanked the series in late January 1963. All four of the young stars would go on to roles in other television series; one of the show's writers, Earl Hammer, would later find fame as creator of the now-iconic family drama *The Waltons*.

James at 15 - 1977



Novelist Dan Wakefield (“Going All The Way”) created this realistic dramatic series about an adolescent boy who faced the trials and tribulations of most teenagers. Lance Kerwin played 15-year-old James Hunter, whose college professor father moved the family from Oregon to Boston, Massachusetts to accept a teaching position.

After initially running away from home, James reluctantly began to deal with his new surroundings as he tried to make friends at fictional Bunker Hill High School. His friends included Ludwig “Sly” Hazeltine (David Hubbard), a hip middle-class African-American student who gave James advice on various

issues—or as he called it, “Slycology.” Susan Myers played Marlene Mahoney, James' intellectual friend. Linden Chiles was James' father, Paul Hunter; Lynn Carlin was mom Joan; Kim Richards and Deidre Berthrong were James' sisters Sandy and Kathy, respectively.

James was a budding photographer who liked to daydream occasionally; his fantasies sometimes became part of the storyline. But the show never resorted to stereotypes, and it dealt credibly with real-life issues such as alcoholism, cancer, premarital sex and sexually transmitted diseases.

In a February 1978 episode, young James marked his 16th birthday by losing his virginity to a Swedish exchange student named Christina (Kirsten Baker); at that point, the series was renamed *James at 16*. But Wakefield left the show after a dispute with NBC over the use of the word “responsible” as a euphemism for birth control, and the network's insistence that James should express remorse over the sexual encounter.

James at 15 initially aired as a made-for-TV film in May 1977; its high ratings led the network to commission a series for the fall. Critics loved it, Tom Shales of “*The Washington Post*” said “it communicates something about the state of being young, rather than just communicating that it wishes to lure young viewers”. But ratings were not as high as NBC had hoped, and “James” was not renewed for a second season. Still, it had an impact on future teen dramas.

Writer Kevin Williamson said he wanted to create a *James at 15* for the '90's when he came up with *Dawson's Creek*. Indeed, “*Dawson's*”—along with *Beverly Hills, 90210*, *My So-Called Life*, *Degrassi High* and *Skins*, to name just a few—owe a debt to *James at 15* for leading the way.

Mike's Reviews A - Z

Life with Luigi - 1952



J. Carrol Naish (the J stood for Joseph) was born in New York in 1896. In spite of his roots he is better known on television as employing a number of ethnic accents in character roles - all except Irish, which is odd because he was of Irish descent. He played the Chinese detective *Charlie Chan* in 1957 and an American Indian in *Guestward Ho!* (1960-61), but his most successful role was as Italian immigrant Luigi Basco in *Life with Luigi* which began on CBS radio in 1948.

The series was so successful that by 1950 it was surpassing Bob Hope in the ratings. In 1952 the series transferred to television.

Luigi is a newly arrived immigrant who settles in Chicago. Situations arose from Luigi's misunderstanding of American life and language, often taking what was said far too literally. The setting for the series alternated between Luigi's antique shop and his friend Pasquale's (Alan Reed) restaurant. It was Pasquale's aim in life to marry Luigi off to his sister Rosa (Jody Gilbert).

Naish only played the character on television for one season and when it briefly returned in 1953 it did so with an entire new cast in the principal roles. However, unlike *The Goldbergs*, a highly regarded series which chronicled the experience of Jewish immigrants in New York, *Life with Luigi* was seen as an example of extreme ethnic stereotyping and many viewers complained that they found it offensive. With the bad publicity it started to receive the sponsors got cold feet and both radio series (last broadcast March 1953) and television series (last broadcast June 1953) were pulled.

The Loretta Young Show / Letter to Loretta - 1953



This filmed anthology series featured the Oscar-winning actress as host and sometime performer and was very popular during its run.

Each episode began with the star making a dramatic entrance in a beautiful gown to introduce the story (which was parodied by comics of the time), and she read a Bible passage at the show's end to emphasize the story's moral.

The series was initially known as *Letter To Loretta*, where Young read a message from one of her fans faced with a problem; the drama that followed was the answer to the fan's letter. The basic format continued a year later, but the show's title was changed to *The Loretta Young Show*.

Proctor and Gamble sponsored the series for much of its run, and the stories ranged from serious drama to light-hearted fables. Young appeared in at least half of the episodes each season aside a male lead. (Ricardo Montalban guest-starred on nine episodes; actor John Newland—who also directed a number of shows—was Young's most frequent co-star, appearing in 13 instalments).

Young won three Emmy awards for her television work. In 1955, the star's health required her to have an operation; guest stars would host and perform in the dramas until Young returned to the screen at the end of 1955. When the series ended six years later and the show aired in repeats on NBC's daytime schedule and in syndication, Young asked that the opening scenes with her flowing gowns be replaced; she feared the fashions had become dated with time.

In 1962, the actress returned to series television playing a widowed mother who was a freelance magazine writer. But *The New Loretta Young Show* lasted just one season on CBS. Loretta Young all but retired from acting in the 1960's. A devout Catholic, she focused on charity work until her death from ovarian cancer on August 12th, 2000.

Mike's Reviews A - Z

Love on a Rooftop - 1967



Newly-married couple David and Julie Willis were from two different worlds: David (Peter Duel) was an apprentice architect making a grand total of \$85.37 a week; Julie (Judy Carne) was the daughter of a wealthy family and was more of a dreamer than a practical homemaker. But love won out, and the pair set up housekeeping in a small top-floor walk-up apartment with a beautiful view of the San Francisco Bay.

David and Julie had to deal with neighbours Stan and Carol Parker (impressionist Rich Little and Barbara Bostock), along with Julie's parents Phyllis and Fred Hammond (Edith Atwater and Herb Voland), who didn't approve of the couple's Spartan lifestyle. Sandy Kenyon was David's co-worker Jim Lucas.

Despite decent ratings, ABC ended *Love on a Rooftop* after just one season. But the network aired repeats during the summer of 1971, in part to capitalize on the two stars—Duel was by that time starring on the series *Alias Smith & Jones* and Carne was a regular on *Rowan & Martin's Laugh-In*.

Lucas Tanner - 1974



David Hartman could have been a professional baseball player—or an economist. Instead, he pursued acting and did rather well at it, starring in *The New Doctors* instalment of NBC's The Bold Ones anthology and guest starring on other series and in films.

Lucas Tanner cast Hartman in the title role of a former baseball player and sportswriter who started a new life after his wife and son died in a car accident. He moved to St. Louis, Missouri and became an English teacher at Harry Truman High School in the suburb of Webster Groves (where the series was filmed). His down-to-earth style of education (and his way of dealing with teen issues such as sex, violence and peer pressure) didn't sit well with his fellow teachers, but was supported by principal Margaret Blumenthal (Rosemary Murphy). Young Robbie Rist played Lucas' neighbour Glendon Farrell.

In mid-season, Margaret was replaced as school principal by John Hamilton (John Randolph), who was more of an adversary for Lucas. The pilot episode of *Lucas Tanner* premiered in May 1974 as a 90-minute TV film; an ad in *TV Guide* magazine featured the headline "Once he pitched in the majors, now he throws curves at the establishment—and the students love him for it!" But the show was a marginal performer in the ratings, and the network set it free after one season.

Lucas Tanner was David Hartman's last role as an actor. In November 1975, he began a new career as the host of ABC's

breakfast show *Good Morning America*, which became the first programme to successfully challenge NBC's entrenched *Today*. Hartman left the show in 1987 after a dispute with ABC over salary and programme control. He continued to host documentaries for public television and other outlets.

Wireless Behaviour - The Impact of the Remote Control

a 2003 article



Take a look around your home. Specifically, check the coffee table, the cushions of the couch, or the top of the nightstand in your bedroom. You're likely to find at least one remote control for an audio or video device. (Although I live in a one-bedroom condominium, I have no less than six remotes--one for the combo TV/VCR in the bedroom; another for the 27-inch Phillips set in the living room; a third for my well-worn GE VCR; the fourth for my JVC stereo receiver; a fifth for a Samsung DVD player; and my latest--remote #6--for my combo surround sound/DVD system!)

The remote--otherwise known as the clicker--is so sleek, so unassuming, so innocuous. And yet like the television itself, it has changed the way we interact with the world and with each other.

Zenith, the grand old name in American radio and television sets (now owned by South Korea's LG Electronics) was the first to bring the magic of changing channels and turning the set on and off from the easy chair. The invention was the result of a demand by the company's president, E.F. McDonald Junior. McDonald believed that commercials would destroy television, so he ordered Zenith engineers to come up with a device that could mute the ads without a viewer having to get up and down to lower the volume. Zenith's first remote, which became available in 1950, was a wired device that had just a few functions. (Ominously, if accurately, Zenith called it "Lazy Bones".) But the high price and that annoying cable from the remote to the TV limited sales.

Five years later, Zenith tried again with a flashlight-like device. Called the "Flash-o-Matic" (invented by Zenith engineer Eugene Polley), it sent

a beam of light to sections of the TV screen to change channels, turn the set on and off, and cut off the sound. It worked--too well. Consumers forgot which section of the TV controlled which function, and the "Flash-o-Matic" was affected by sunlight or lamp lighting.

Enter Zenith physicist Robert Adler (who's still alive and well at age 89). He came up with using ultrasound--in this case, four aluminium rods in a device only slightly larger than a pack of cigarettes, to handle the main remote functions. (A 1957 magazine ad for the remote featured George Burns remark to his TV and real-life wife: "Look out Gracie! With Zenith Space Command, I can change channels from across the room!", along with the pitch "Nothing between you and the set but space!")

"Space Command" added about \$100 to the cost of a Zenith set (the remote needed special tubes or transistors inside the TV), but it proved relatively popular; more than 9 million of the devices were sold between 1956 and 1981. "Space Command" did have a few problems besides cost; for one thing, you could push one of the buttons and the family dog would bark in response to the high-frequency sound!

By the early 1980's came infrared beams, low-frequency lights detected by a receiver in the TV. The infrared quickly became the standard for modern remotes; thanks to fast-improving technology, it was possible to include a remote with every new set at no increase in price. Further innovations led to the development of the on-screen menu, where you could adjust the color and set the channels on a set. (The on-screen menu was also a big leap forward for the video cassette recorder, allowing users to "time shift", or programme a show for recording, without squinting at a small display on the VCR itself.) Soon the infrared remote spread to audio equipment and other devices. By the end of the 1990's, nearly every new TV and VCR included a remote; at least 90% of all US households now have a remote-controlled television.



The remote has become fodder in the never-ending battle between the sexes. Research has shown that men are more likely to channel-surf with the remote if they're tired of a particular show, or when a commercial comes on. Women tend to channel surf less, and are more likely to stay with a show they like. A 1997 survey by a New Jersey firm called "Knowledge Networks" found that 20% of men switched channels at least six times during prime-time, while only 11% of women channel-surfed that often.

Consider these passages from a website called "Frequently Asked Questions About Men":

Q: Why do men act like they own the remote control?

A: What do you mean ACT? We do; possession is nine-tenths of the law. Besides, it is an awesome responsibility not to be entrusted to just anyone....

Q: Why can't men stay on a single channel for more than two seconds?

A: You're kidding, right? What if there's something good on the next channel? We could miss it if we stay on one channel for too long.

(See Also: Why do men fear commitment?)

Perhaps comic and former sitcom star Jerry Seinfeld had the best answer why males use the remote more than females: "Because men hunt and women nest".

The remote has also changed the way broadcasters and advertisers do business. For years, the "station break" between shows was the signal for local stations to insert their own commercials. It was also a sign for bored viewers to flip over to another channel. In 1993, NBC adopted a new policy on its Thursday night comedies "Seinfeld" and "Frasier": No station break. Instead, viewers saw the final scene of "Seinfeld", immediately followed by "Frasier's" animated opening credits. (Local NBC stations were able to insert their ads within either show.) The practice spread to other shows and other networks.

And there are fewer television theme songs these days; to help prevent channel surfing, the opening credit titles of some shows have either been shortened or are flashed on the screen as the action gets underway. Advertisers have also been forced to keep viewers from either switching channels or hitting the fast forward button on the VCR. They have all but dumped traditional hard sell pitches and jingles for fast-paced action and story-like themes to keep viewers from hitting the mute button--or worse. And some advertisers have actually turned the pitch into a 30 minute show, giving us the infamous "infomercial". Some have even blamed the remote for turning Americans into a nation of overweight, lazy, passive viewers. (Nonsense. That began with the rise of television in the late 1940's and early 1950's!) And as one pundit pointed out on the website halife.com: "Most people exert more energy looking for the remote than they would by just getting up and turning on the TV".

Sure you could blame the clicker for all the woe and worry in the world. But why bother? Sit back, relax, and punch that button. Turn up the volume. Switch over from Will & Grace to CSI. Stop that flashing 12:00 on the VCR by setting the correct time. Say a prayer (and thanks) to Robert Adler, the man who doesn't watch TV, but helped make TV viewing a little easier. And do what I do--keep a supply of fresh batteries in the freezer, just in case the clicker conks out!

Makin' It - 1979



An ABC sitcom that attempted to cash in on the disco craze of the late 1970's, it had a connection to the blockbuster film "Saturday Night Fever." But the idea of combining disco music with traditional sitcom shtick didn't sit well with viewers and the show lasted just eight episodes. Gary Marshall (the man behind such comedy hits as "Happy Days," "Laverne & Shirley" and "Mork & Mindy") produced and created "Makin' It" along with Mark Rothman and Lowell Ganz.

It centred on the life of Billy Manucci (David Naughton), a Passaic, New Jersey college student who lived at home with his parents and worked during the day at an ice cream parlour called Tasty Treats. At night, Billy hung out with his friends at the Inferno disco. He looked up to his brother Tony (Greg Antonacci), the star dancer at Inferno. At home, Billy dealt with his sister Tina (Denise Miller) and his parents Dorothy and Joseph (Ellen Travolta and Lou Antonio). Billy's best friends were Al Sorrentino (Ralph Seymour), also known as "The Kingfish" (someone was watching repeats of Amos n' Andy) and Bernard Fusco (Gary Prendergast); Billy's girlfriend Corky Crandall was played by Rebecca Balding.

But Billy was in a quandary: Should he strive to become the top dancer at Inferno, or finish college to become a teacher? Makin' It was yet another of Marshall's working-class comedies with broad, physical humour, and was a far cry from "Saturday Night Fever". Those who expected the grittier ambiance of "Fever" came away disappointed.

The show made its debut February 1st, 1979 in a "sneak peek" after Marshall's top-ranked "Mork & Mindy." The following night, it settled in as a replacement for the variety series "Donny & Marie." But viewers stayed away, prompting ABC to give up on "Makin' It"; its final dance card was filled March 23rd.



Mike's Reviews A - Z

Mr Peepers - 1962



One of American television's earliest and best sitcoms, it was a showcase for its star Wally Cox and a stellar supporting cast. Cox, a rising comic of the day, played Robinson Peepers, a science teacher at fictional Jefferson High School. His shy, quiet manner and tendency to get into unusual situations provided the show's gentle humour.

Marion Lorne (later to turn up in *Bewitched* as Aunt Clara) played English teacher Mrs. Gurney; Tony Randall (*The Odd Couple*) was brash history teacher Harvey Weskit and Patricia Benoit was

Nancy Remington, the school's nurse, who eventually became Peepers' romantic interest—and his wife (their 1954 wedding was one of the most-watched television events that year).

The Ford Motor Company sponsored the first eight episodes of *Mr. Peepers* during the summer of 1952; despite good ratings, NBC did not bring it back when the fall season began. But faced with the total critical and ratings failure of a new filmed comedy called *Doc Corkle* (which lasted just three episodes), NBC quickly rushed *Mr. Peepers* back into production for a late October 1952 start. The show ran through June 1955.

The series aired live from New York City, but only 102 episodes have survived on kinescope; many of those episodes have been released on DVD in the States. Wally Cox became typecast as a milquetoast after *Mr. Peepers* ended (he was actually an athletic, well-built man who counted former roommate Marlon Brando as one of his closest friends).

Cox appeared as a guest on various variety shows and sitcoms; lent his voice to the cartoon character *Underdog*; and was a regular on the game show *The Hollywood Squares*. Wally Cox died February 15th, 1973; Brando reportedly kept Cox's ashes with him. When Brando died in 2004, his family scattered both Brando and Cox's ashes over California's Death Valley.

My Favorite Husband - 1953



My Favorite Husband started life as a 1948 radio series which starred Lucille Ball and was the basis for her famous Lucy character in the TV sitcom *I Love Lucy*. *My Favourite Husband*, with Ball co-starring alongside Richard Denning, would have transferred to television and the history of the US sitcom might have been significantly different if it hadn't been for Ball's refusal to do a domestic sitcom without her real-life husband Desi Arnaz. CBS agreed and *I Love Lucy* was born with several of the 'Husband' radio scripts being reworked into the 'Lucy' series.

My Favorite Husband finally made it to television in 1953, starring Joan Caulfield and Barry Nelson as Liz and George Cooper. He was a successful bank executive and she a scatterbrained housewife. They lived comfortably in a suburban home next door to the Cobbs,

social high-climbers who were always trying to get the Coopers to improve their image.

The series enjoyed modest success for two full seasons but for the third, broadcast 18 months later, CBS decided to make several changes. Vanessa Brown replaced Joan Caulfield as Liz and the next door neighbours became the Shepard's even though Alix Talton, who had played Myra Cobb, was now playing Myra Shepard. If viewers were confused, then they needn't have worried too much. Three months after all these changes were made the series folded.

TV Courtroom: From Traffic Court to Judge Judy

a 2003 article



America's fascination with the law has led television producers to stage mock court proceedings for entertainment. Dealing with everything from a traffic ticket to the dissolution of a marriage, these courtroom shows began in the 1950's, and have become one of the hottest genres in syndicated television.

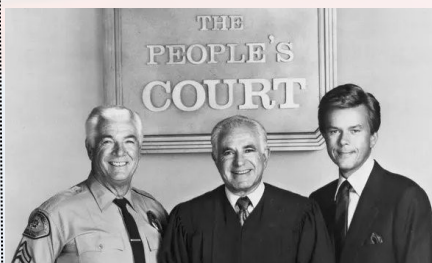
There were court-type programmes in the early days of TV, such as *They Stand Accused* on the now-defunct DuMont network. The programmes were cheap to produce and drew respectable ratings. But the first wave of courtroom realism probably began in the summer of 1957 with *Traffic Court*, a public affairs programme that initially aired on ABC's Los Angeles station, but went over the entire network in June 1958. *Traffic Court*, with Edgar Allan Jones Junior (a UCLA law professor) as the judge, was based on real Los Angeles traffic court trials and arraignments. It was moved from timeslot to timeslot, where ABC had a hole to fill in its prime time schedule; it ended its network run in March 1959.

ABC also aired such courtroom shows as *Day In Court* (civil and criminal cases), along with its spin-off shows *Accused* and *Morning Court*.

CBS gave the genre a try in September 1957 with *The Verdict Is Yours*, which featured real-life judges and attorneys presiding over unscripted cases; future sports announcer Jim McKay provided the trial commentary. *Verdict* ran in prime time until 1958; a daytime version lasted until 1962.

Perhaps one of the best known such programmes was *Divorce Court*, which initially ran from 1958 until 1969. It was sold to local stations, and gained notoriety for featuring cases involving adultery. In those days, cheating on a spouse was not tolerated; viewers had to decide whether the husband or the wife was fooling around before the judge made his final ruling.

But for the most part, the genre was considered hokey for modern television viewers and pretty much lay dormant during the 1960's and '70's. It would take game show creator Ralph Edwards ("Truth Or Consequences"; "This Is Your Life") to revive the format.



In 1981, Edwards introduced *The People's Court*, which was actually more of a televised small claims hearing than a full-fledged trial. The format was simple:

Two real-life parties agreed to settle their case on national television, with the final decision made by retired Superior Court Judge Joseph Wapner. He heard both sides, rendered a verdict, and awarded the injured party compensation of no more than \$1,500. A studio audience served as court observers; reporter Doug Llewelyn interviewed the parties after the verdict. *The People's Court*, which was syndicated, was an instant hit; it ran in its original form from 1981 until 1993—a total of 2,484 episodes.



The success of *People's Court* led to yet another revival of *Divorce Court*, along with copycats such as *The Judge*; *Superior Court* and *Trial By Jury*. But again, the genre all but died with the demise of *People's Court*.

By 1996, Americans transfixed by the controversial O.J. Simpson murder trial were hungry for more courtroom action. Enter Judge Judy Sheindlin, who earned a reputation as a tough but fair judge in New York City's Family Court system, with an attitude that those who were guilty should take responsibility for their actions. (Tellingly, her best-selling book was titled "Don't Pee On My Leg and Tell Me It's Raining".)

Following a profile on the newsmagazine *60 Minutes*, Sheindlin was approached by television producers to preside over a court-like series. She retired from the New York City bench and became known as Judge Judy. Syndicated to local stations in September 1996, *Judge Judy* became an instant hit, as Sheindlin oversaw cases ranging from property disputes to child custody—always with the no-nonsense, straight-talking style she had become famous for. (Some critics, however, find the judge rather rude and simplistic.)

Judge Judy immediately found herself with competition. There was a revival of *The People's Court* (which at one time featured Judy Sheindlin's husband, Jerry Sheindlin; he proved to be no match for his wife in the ratings). Shows similar to *Judge Judy* included *Judge Mills Lane*; *Curtis Court*; *Moral Court*; *Power of Attorney* and *We The Jury*. But none could dislodge Judge Judy as the queen of courtroom drama. There have been a number of successes, including *Judge Joe Brown*; *Judge Mathis*; *Judge Hatchett*; *Texas Justice* and a THIRD reincarnation of that old standby, *Divorce Court*.

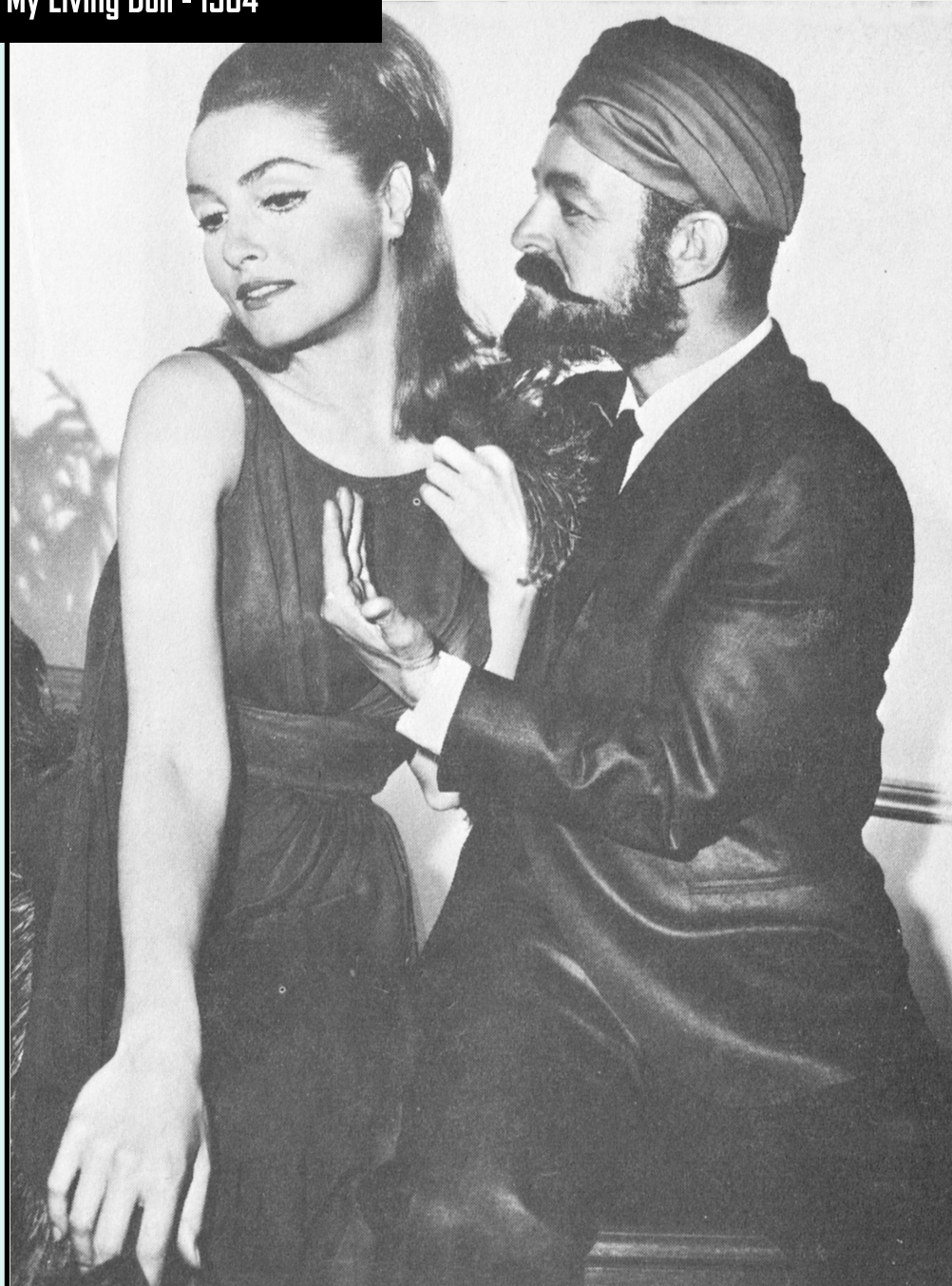
There have been offbeat courtroom shows, as well. Former *People's Court* judge Joseph Wapner oversees *Animal Court* on cable's Animal Planet, where pet owners try to get their disputes settled. Another entry was *Sex Court* on the Playboy Channel, with an attractive jurist known as Judge Julie. MTV came in with *Blame Game*, where a studio audience decided which party was responsible for the breakup of a relationship.

Most if not all of these programmes have exploited human emotion and greed. They can occasionally pander to the lowest common denominator. But as long as viewers tune in, that won't stop producers from coming up with new versions of disorder in the court. The (Nielsen) jury has spoken.



Mike's Reviews A - Z

My Living Doll - 1964



Producer Jack Chertok, who hit paydirt with *My Favourite Martian* tried a slightly different approach in this comedy about a sexy female robot and the psychologist assigned to care for her.

Bob Cummings (in his last major series role) played Doctor Bob McDonald, who looked after "Rhoda Miller" (Julie Newmar), also known as AF709. She was named after her creator, Carl Miller (Henry Beckman). When Miller was reassigned to Pakistan, he asked Bob to complete "Rhoda's" education—teaching her to be the "perfect woman." Of course, Bob had the job of also keeping "Rhoda's" robotic identity a secret. The situation wasn't helped much by neighbour Peter Robinson (Jack Mullaney), who was smitten with "Rhoda." or by Bob's sister, Irene Adams (Doris Dowling) who lived with him as his housekeeper to make sure no hanky-panky was going on between Bob and "Rhoda."

My Living Doll was definitely sexist by today's standards, as "Rhoda" was taught to keep house and follow a man's orders. Critics liked Newmar's

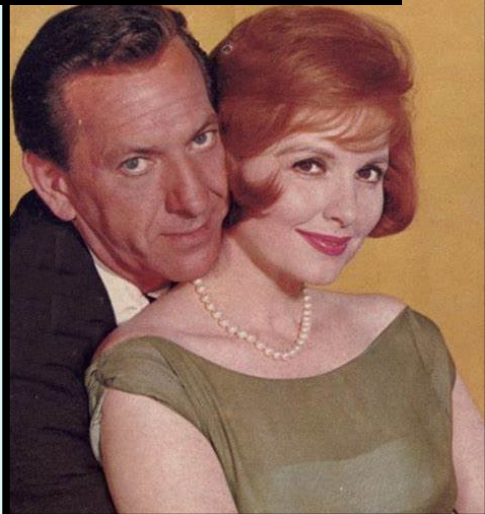
performance (she would go on to a number of roles, including that of Catwoman on the 1960's series version of *Batman*) Cummings was also praised; no surprise for the veteran of such sitcoms as *My Hero* and *Love That Bob*. But it was scheduled against NBC's top-rated western *Bonanza*.

Predictably, *My Living Doll* landed in the bottom half of the ratings charts. CBS did move the series to Wednesday nights in an effort to win a larger audience, but Bob Cummings was written out of the show after 21 episodes. (Cummings wanted out of his contract due in part to the show's ratings; there were also reports he and Newmar didn't get along on the set.) The remaining five episodes focused on Peter (who learned "Rhoda" was a robot) and was assigned to care for her after Bob was sent to Pakistan (just like "Rhoda's" creator Carl Miller). Adams was written out of the series and replaced by Nora Marlow, who played Peter's housekeeper Mrs. Moffat. All the changes didn't help, and *My Living Doll* was not renewed for a second season.

The series did leave one legacy to pop culture: The *"Random House Historical Dictionary of American Slang"* says the sci-fi phrase "does not compute" originated on *My Living Doll*. Which was apt, considering the series didn't.

Mike's Reviews A - Z

90 Bristol Court - 1964



An unusual but unsuccessful effort in the sitcom genre, it featured three 30-minute comedies—one after another—with a unifying theme. In this case, *90 Bristol Court* was the address of a California apartment complex where the stars of all three sitcoms lived; the only character that appeared in the trio of shows was handyman Cliff Murdoch, played by Guy Raymond.

First up was *Karen*, which starred Debbie Watson as a typical teenage girl named Karen Scott. Her parents were played by Richard Denning and Mary La Roche; Gina Gillespie was her younger sister Mimi. (Trivia: The show's theme song was performed by *The Beach Boys*!)

Next was *Tom, Dick and Mary*—which, despite its somewhat racy title, was squeaky-clean. Don Galloway and Joyce Bulifant played newlyweds Tom and Mary Gentry. To help pay the rent at 90 Bristol Court, the couple took in Tom's best friend Dick Moran (Steve Franken); all three worked at the same hospital—Tom and Dick were interns; Mary was a secretary.

The final series was *Harris Against the World*, starring Jack Klugman as Allan Harris, a movie studio employee who had to juggle work with his family. Patricia Barry was his wife Kate; Claire Wilcox and David Macklin were the couple's children DeeDee and Billy. Klugman, who considered himself a serious actor at the time, signed for the "Harris" role before he won an Emmy for an episode of the legal drama *The Defenders*.

Critics didn't take to any of the shows on *90 Bristol Court*; one called the experiment "as synthetic in concept as a \$15 suit." Viewers seemed to feel the same; up against ABC's *Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea* along with the powerful CBS trio of *To Tell the Truth, I've Got a Secret* and *The Andy Griffith Show*, all three sitcoms landed at the bottom of the Nielsen ratings. But *Karen*'s Debbie Watson was a fan favourite, judging by the number of letters sent to NBC.

In January 1965, the network axed the *90 Bristol Court* concept by cancelling *Harris Against the World* and *Tom, Dick and Mary* and eliminating Guy Raymond's handyman character. Only *Karen* survived as a stand-alone series, but ratings didn't improve, and the teenager and her family was gone at the end of the season. Watson would go on to star in the short-lived sitcom version of *Tammy* and retired from acting not long after. Klugman did better with *The Odd Couple* and *Quincy*, while Bulifant would appear in dozens of sitcoms, including *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*. Denning, who played Lucille Ball's fictional spouse on radio's *My Favorite Husband*, would later become a regular on *Hawaii 5-0*.

Occasional Wife - 1966



One of the more outlandish comedies to air on American television. Michael Callan played Peter Christopher, a bachelor and executive at the Brahms Baby Food Company. Since owner Max Brahms (Jack Collins) was devoted to marriage and family, the unattached Peter found it hard to get promoted. His solution came in the form of aspiring painter Greta Patterson (Patricia Harty), who also worked as a hat-check girl. Greta agreed to pose as his "occasional wife" during social and business functions when the boss was around. In return, Peter set Greta up in an apartment on the eighth floor (two floors above his); he also paid for her art lessons and a pair of contact lenses.

The humour (such as it was) was caused by the complications of having Peter and Greta pose as husband and wife, forcing them to reach each other's apartments through the fire escape—much to the chagrin of their seventh-floor neighbour (Bryan O'Byrne, billed on the series as "Man-in-Middle"). If you became confused by all the developments, narrator and veteran sportscaster Vin Scully was on hand to provide the "play by play action." Viewer interest was strong when *Occasional Wife* made its debut, but ratings soon fell, and NBC ordered a divorce after just one season.

Sylvester "Pat" Weaver

2003



Many American television programmers were successful, in that they came up with programmes people wanted to watch. But few have truly shaped the broadcast landscape as completely as Sylvester "Pat" Weaver, who was considered a pioneer and a visionary, with concepts and formats that are still a part of the industry today. Some people think of Weaver only as the father of the accomplished actress Sigourney Weaver.

He was far more than that.

Born Sylvester Laflin Weaver Junior on December 21st, 1908 in Los Angeles, he studied philosophy and classics at Dartmouth College, graduating magna cum laude. He worked at a variety of radio stations as an announcer, actor, producer and advertising salesman. Prior to World War Two, Weaver went to work at the Young & Rubicam advertising agency, handling a variety of radio shows for the agency's clients. (He produced the classic "Fred Allen's Town Hall Tonight" and was advertising manager for the American Tobacco Company, helping to sell Lucky Strike cigarettes to the public.)

After his stint in the Navy during the war, Weaver resumed his work at Young & Rubicam. Then in 1949, he went to work for the National Broadcasting Company as head of the television programming department. A year later, he became president of the NBC television network.

In his first duty as an NBC executive, Weaver rescinded an order to cancel the news panel discussion show "Meet the Press". (It remains on the air to this day, the longest-running series on American television.) But that wasn't all. When commercial television began in the US, ad agencies-not the networks--created programmes and paid the stars. But as television became more popular and increasingly expensive to produce, only the largest companies could afford to advertise in the early days of the new medium. Weaver changed all that. He developed what was called a "magazine" format, where the network produced the show and covered the costs; different advertisers bought time on the

programme to spread out the expense. More than a decade later, the "magazine" format all but ended the ad agency-produced show, and is still used today.

Weaver also instituted a policy of culture and education on NBC that he dubbed "Operation Frontal Lobes," producing everything from history (including the famed World War II documentary "Victory At Sea") to operas, musicals and shows featuring the top intellectuals and scientists of the day.

One of Weavers' longest-lasting contributions to television is the "spectacular," better-known today as the "special". Although one-shot shows featuring top talent were a mainstay of television programming in the early 1950's, Weaver instituted the "spectacular" format in 1954 as a way to challenge rival CBS' ratings dominance. Weaver believed well-produced plays and musicals with well-known stars would keep the NBC schedule "vibrant" and draw viewers away from such CBS fare as "Ed Sullivan" and "I Love Lucy". (Most of the new "spectaculars" would air in colour, all the better for NBC's parent, the Radio Corporation of America, to promote RCA colour television sets.)



In the fall of '54, Weaver scheduled monthly specials, usually running 90 minutes or two hours, on Sunday, Monday and Saturday nights. After a rough start with the poorly-received musical "Satin and Spurs", the format clicked with such shows as a new version of the classic "Our Town" with Frank Sinatra; and the play "The Petrified Forest" with Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall. But the most successful of Weaver's "spectaculars" came in March 1955, with the television staging of the classic "Peter Pan". Fresh from its Broadway run, star Mary Martin, a top-flight cast, memorable songs and excellent direction made "Peter Pan" the most-watched television programme in the medium's short history (an estimated 65 million American viewers tuned in that night).

The fertile mind of Pat Weaver brought NBC many other programmes. He had the idea to produce a new show for the "fringe" hours of weekday mornings between 7:00 and 9:00.

Some called it "Weaver's Folly". But "Today", which premiered on January 14th, 1952, soon became a money-maker. A combination of news and entertainment, it was initially hosted by the late, great Dave Garroway. On the very first show, Garroway told his audience that "Today" "begins a new kind of television". And he was right. "Today" is still running (seven days a week) on NBC; it remains the top-rated US morning programme, despite strong competition from ABC ("Good Morning America"), CBS ("The Early Show"), and similar programmes on broadcast and cable channels. The format spread across the pond; all over the world, there are "Today"-like programmes waking people up and giving them the blend of news, features and light entertainment they want.



Weaver turned his attention to the post-prime time hours for new formats. In 1950 came "Broadway Open House"; co-hosted by comic Jerry Lester and a buxom blonde known to viewers as "Dagmar", it was a success but lasted less than two years as Lester left the show. Weaver tried the late-night format again in 1954, with a programme that had become a success on NBC's flagship New York City station (WNBC), hosted by a relatively unknown announcer and entertainer named Steve Allen.

"Tonight" went national, and Allen blended humour, music and serious discussion into a 90 minute format. "Tonight" thrived and survived for decades, with Allen's successors Jack Paar, Johnny Carson and Jay Leno at the helm. "Tonight" gave NBC near dominance of the late night format for six decades; only CBS' "Late Show with David Letterman" posed a serious, if brief challenge to that monarchy in the early 1990's.

Weaver also emphasized live variety programming over filmed series. His greatest success in the format was "Your Show of Shows", a live 90-minute variety show that aired every Saturday night and became a showcase for the talents of stars Sid Caesar, Imogene Coca, Carl Reiner and Howard Morris--not to mention a slew of talented writers that included Mel Brooks, Neil Simon and Larry Gelbart. Weaver himself appeared on the very last "Show of Shows" broadcast in 1954.

Weaver tried to challenge CBS' soap operas and game shows for daytime dominance with live plays and an intelligent programme aimed at housewives, called "Home"; they didn't succeed in the long run.

Sadly, neither did Weaver's tenure at NBC. His desire for high-quality programmes and the use of television to make, as he put it, "the average man the uncommon man" was thwarted by the continued challenge of CBS. That network's brilliant chairman Bill Paley put together a television schedule that surpassed NBC in both ratings and revenues. General David Sarnoff, who headed the RCA empire, had the excuse he needed to put his son Bobby in control at the network. It didn't help that Weaver and David Sarnoff never got along; Weaver once referred to the elder Sarnoff as "General Fangs"). In early 1956, Weaver was "kicked upstairs" to a ceremonial "chairman" position at the network; Bobby Sarnoff became NBC's new president. He immediately cut back most of Weaver's live programmes and "spectaculars", and quickly moved forward with filmed comedies and dramas.

Weaver resigned from NBC in late 1956 and returned to advertising. For a time, he became a pioneer in what was then called "pay television". In the early 1960's, he became part of "Subscription Television" (STV), a Southern California outfit that offered programmes to viewers willing to pay for them. But movie houses launched an anti-pay TV campaign that was eventually overturned in court. STV went under, but it would pave the way for the growth of cable and satellite programming, now in a majority of American homes.

By now a legend in television history, Weaver became increasingly critical of the increasingly cutthroat and commercial nature of US broadcasting. He believed there was room for a little culture along with cake and ice cream that viewers lapped up.

Sylvester "Pat" Weaver died on March 15th, 2002. He was 93.

In one of his seemingly endless memos during his NBC years, Weaver wrote, "television, by itself, can influence the world for good beyond all present thinking." He called for "the inclusion of cultural and informational and enriching, enlightening material" within the diet of formatted comedy, drama and advertisements. Superlatives can not do justice to the life and vision of Sylvester "Pat" Weaver; he truly left television a better medium than when he found it.



Mike's Reviews A - Z

The Nanny - 1993



Fran Drescher, who first made her acting mark as “Connie” in *Saturday Night Fever*, starred in this sometimes cartoonish sitcom about a “Jewish-American Princess” who became a caretaker for the children of a successful Broadway producer. As the show’s animated opening theme (and lively title song) established, Fran Fine (Drescher) was fired as a bridal consultant by her fiancée, and ended up selling cosmetics door-to-door. She landed on the doorstep of successful producer Maxwell Sheffield (Charles Shaughnessy), who liked her moxie and quickly hired Fran to care for his three kids—Maggie (Nicholle Tom), Brighton (Benjamin Salsbury) and Grace (Madeline Zima).

Working with Fran was Niles (Daniel Davis), the sarcastic butler. Then there was Maxwell’s socialite business partner Chastity Claire (C.C.) Babcock (Lauren Lane), who viewed Fran as an underling and a threat to her hopes of making Maxwell her husband. (Niles loved Fran and hated C.C., so it was easy to tell whose side he was on.) Always on hand to give Fran both advice and grief is her equally flamboyant mother Sylvia (Renee Taylor) and grandmother Yetta (Ann Morgan Guilbert, formerly Millie Helper on *The Dick Van Dyke Show*).

It didn’t take long for Fran to bond with Maxwell’s kids and give the Sheffield household a dose of humour and free spirit, setting the tone with her nasal, foghorn-like voice and her wardrobe. But her middle-class roots served Fran well, whether solving one of the kids’ problems or helping Maxwell in his career. Near the end of the show’s run, Maxwell realized he loved Fran deeply and eventually married her; Fran adopted Maxwell’s children and became pregnant, giving birth to twins. The series finale had the Sheffield family moving from New York to California—and in a real shocker, Niles ended up marrying his nemesis C.C.!

Drescher and her then-husband Peter Marc Jacobson created *The Nanny* with the help of veteran sitcom producers Robert Sternin and Prudence Frasier (*Who’s The Boss?*). CBS Entertainment chairman Jeff Sagnasky loved the premise and stuck by the series, even when its ratings were low. During the summer of 1994, viewers finally found *The Nanny*, and its popularity rose, ensuring its fate. After the series ended its run, Drescher and Jacobson divorced (Drescher later admitted Jacobson was gay, but the two remained good friends) and she was diagnosed with uterine cancer, requiring a radical hysterectomy. She was given a clean bill of health. Drescher later co-starred in the short-lived sitcom *Living With Fran*, became a champion for women with cancer and gay rights, and even considered a run for Congress. In 2011, Drescher starred in a new comedy for cable’s TV Land, called—appropriately—*Happily Divorced*.

Please Don't Eat the Daisies - 1965



Based on the 1957 best-selling book by Jean Kerr (which also spawned a successful 1960 film starring Doris Day and David Niven), this sitcom centred on an unusual suburban family. Jim Nash (Mark Miller taught English in the town of Ridgemont, New York. Wife Joan (Patricia Crowley) was a freelance writer who used the pen name Joan Holliday. She hated to do housework, cooking and other traditional homemaking chores, making her sort of an early feminist before that term was in vogue.

The couple had four boys, oldest son Kyle (Kim Tyler), younger Joel (Brian Nash) and seven-year-old twins Tracey and Trevor (Joe and Jeff Fithian). Veteran actress Ellen Corby (later Esther Walton on *The Waltons*) appeared occasionally as the family maid Martha O’Reilly; the Nashes also had a 150-pound sheepdog named Ladadog. The

family lived in a large, older castle-like home in Ridgemont (228 Circle Avenue) complete with a bell tower. Somewhat ahead of its time, *Please Don't Eat The Daisies* managed to run for two seasons.

Mike's Reviews A - Z

Queer Eye for the Straight Guy - TV Reality Breakthrough or a Gay Minstrel Show?

In 2003 in his 'View from America' weekly update for Television Heaven, Mike reviewed a new reality show from the cable network Bravo - 'Queer Eye' was destined to become a huge hit with viewers



This has been an interesting summer for reality shows in America.

The broadcast networks have slapped together a number of these programmes as an alternative to reruns-and with the hope one or two will become major hits, not unlike "Who Wants To Be A Millionaire", "Survivor" and "American Idol". From relationship series to makeover programmes and bizarre contests, we are fixated watching others being surprised, shocked, upset, and humiliated. The genre may be cruel, but we watch anyway-not unlike a bad car accident that demands attention.

But while the networks' various entries have done so-so or worse, one new reality show airing on an upscale cable channel has become the "water cooler" programme of the season, talked about endlessly and envied by competitors.

And it features not one, but FIVE gay men who make no apologies for who they are.

"Queer Eye for the Straight Guy" likes to call itself a "make better" show, not a "makeover" entry. But there's no question it has become a major hit for the Bravo network.

It features five gay men, each experts in his field (Ted Allen on food and wine; Carson Kressley on fashion; Kyan Douglas on grooming; Jai Rodriguez on culture and Thom Filicia on interior design). The "Fab Five", as they are known, begin each episode driving to the home of their subject for the week in a large, black sport utility vehicle, and provide some information on who he is and what he wants to accomplish. The quintet then descend upon the man's home and tear him and the house apart-physically and verbally. All five make catty remarks about everything from the man's décor (Carson: "You put a living room where the crack den used to be!") to his clothes (Carson again, when told by one of his "straight" subjects that he shops at K-Mart: "Don't ever use that kind of language in front of me.")

Mike's Reviews A - Z

In real life, the "Fab Five" (and an unseen team) take about four days to do a complete makeover. (But through the magic of television, it all happens in less than an hour.) We see the week's subject go to hair salons, spas, clothing stores, gourmet food stores and so forth. After the transformation of man and home, the woman in the subject's life is brought in. One hopeful proposed to his fiancée (she agreed); a promising artist held a successful show in New York; a background crooner sings a self-penned love song to his wife. Those moments are captured on videotape and are viewed by the Fab Five as they sit in a plush Manhattan office. The subjects are well-groomed, better dressed, and more confident. The Fab Five critique his style and cheer him on as he presents his new personality to those around him. And with a toast ("Cheers, queers"), the five miracle workers move on to the next subject and another "make better" assignment.

Those moments of support (and the sarcastic remarks that rival anything seen on "Will & Grace") coupled with an upbeat, sweet tone make "Queer Eye" stand out from the mean-spirited reality glut.



The gay men really do want their straight guy to make good and use that self-confidence to improve his life.

Executive producer David Collins came up with "Queer Eye" after seeing a woman berate her husband for his appearance; a group of gay men felt so sorry for the guy, they went over to him and gave him grooming and culture tips. Collins (who happens to be gay) pitched the idea to his production partner David Metzler (who's straight). Together, they shopped the idea around until Bravo agreed to do the pilot.

It may not have succeeded a few years ago, but as they say in Hollywood, timing is everything.

Just weeks before "Queer Eye" made its July debut, the US Supreme Court struck down laws in a dozen states that made it illegal for two consenting adults to perform certain sexual acts behind closed doors. Canada legalized same-sex marriages while courts in a few US states considered the idea. New York City opened the first-ever high school for gay teenagers. And the Episcopal Church in America confirmed the Reverend Gene Robinson of New Hampshire as the church's first openly homosexual bishop. So it comes as no surprise that "Queer Eye" has received plenty of media attention. It certainly didn't hurt the ratings. Nearly three million viewers now tune in every week. That's small potatoes for a broadcast network, but a gold mine for Bravo, which usually can count on less than a million viewers during prime time. Even more important, the show has become a topic of discussion by television critics, lifestyle writers and political pundits-free publicity that's worth millions of dollars. On the flip side, there are two major issues with "Queer Eye": One is inherent in the format; the other is a case of potential overexposure.

First, does the show's format stereotype gay men? After all, you have five handsome, thin, and well dressed "friends of Dorothy" chatting about design, clothes and food, with bitchy remarks that would have made Bette Davis proud. Conservative media critic Brent Bozell lashed out at the programme, calling it "heterophobic", suggesting that only gay men have taste and culture. Says the decidedly straight guy Bozell: "It's the Gay Supremacy hour...Ever seen a show more dedicated to a 'straight-bashing' proposition?" Even Tom Shales, the respected television critic for "The Washington Post", says "Queer Eye" consists of "stereotypes on parade" with a "patronizing mentality".

To this "Queer Eye" (yours truly), the show deals with just one aspect of gay culture. As in the heterosexual world, there are extremes of masculinity among gay men-from very macho to effeminate.

Mike's Reviews A - Z

But American culture seems to put a premium on so-called "real men". A more legitimate complaint by both Bozell and Shales is the subtle and not-so-subtle plugs for various suppliers on the show. At least on "Queer Eye", the self-promotion is relatively restrained compared to some other reality shows-specifically, NBC's "The Restaurant", about a chef who sets up his own Italian eatery. The show is pretty good; but the endless shots of American Express cards, Mitsubishi SUV's, Verizon wireless phones and other advertisers can get on your nerves. My solution has been to tape "The Restaurant" and fast-forward through all the commercials and plugs. Result: A better, shorter programme.

I have said before that controversial shows have to have two elements for success-support from viewers, and advertisers willing to promote their products on the show. That HAS happened in the case of "Queer Eye". (Mainstream firms such as Whirlpool appliances have advertised on the show, which happens to draw a mostly female audience.) But the golden goose could soon stop laying those 14 carat eggs, thanks to Bravo's parent NBC-the home of network hype.

NBC has been doing everything possible to make "Queer Eye" a mainstream hit on the broadcast network. Soon after its premiere, a half-hour version of "Queer Eye" aired after NBC's gay-themed sitcom "Will & Grace"; nearly seven million watched. On August 14th, NBC finally aired a whole episode of "Queer Eye" in place of an "ER" rerun; ratings improved by more than 60%. Later that evening, the five "Queer Eye" stars did a makeover of "Tonight Show" host Jay Leno-a case of someone who needs funnier material far more than a new wardrobe. Meanwhile, Bravo is airing repeats of "Queer" endlessly. Robert Bianco, the TV critic for "USA Today", warns that NBC "seems determined to prove it can take the show's 'Fab Five' from unknown to overexposed overnight".

Seems just a few years ago that ABC did the same thing by overexposing the American version of "Who Wants To Be A Millionaire"; it has paid for that blunder ever since.

As much as I love "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy" (and I do), as a middle-aged gay writer and journalist who happens to love television in general, I'm feeling the pressure too. Novelist Louis Bayard correctly pointed out that after watching the series, "(Straight viewers) come away believing every homosexual is a hairstylist, runway model, interior designer, oenophile, chef and cultural commissar wrapped up in a form-fitting ribbed tee. It just ain't so."

I can't disagree with that. I have good hair (albeit greying and balding), and I'm far from a thin supermodel. (It takes me an hour just to get up enough courage to use the treadmill in our condo clubhouse!) And while I'm a good cook, my idea of fashion sense is finding new shirts for \$3.98 at the neighbourhood Factory-2-U!

Meanwhile, you be the judge. (My friends in the UK will soon get the show on a national satellite channel, as will several other European countries.) Sure, the "Fab Five" know what they're doing, and the show is a kick to watch. But not all gay men have a taste for the cultured metropolitan life. And not all straight guys are hopeless Neanderthals. Still, I do wish more reality shows can straddle the fine line between humiliation and redemption the way "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy" does.



Mike's Reviews A - Z

Six O'Clock Follies - 1980



In 1980, it seemed safe to use the Vietnam War as a setting for a television series. After all, the films *The Deer Hunter* and *Apocalypse Now* did well at the box office, and ABC had scored the year before with the sensitive made-for-TV film *Friendly Fire*, starring Carol Burnett as the mother of an American soldier killed by U.S. troops in Vietnam. So NBC President Fred Silverman figured Vietnam could serve as the backdrop for a war comedy in the style of the still-popular *M*A*S*H*.

Six O'Clock Follies boasted an interesting cast, including Laurence Fishburne, Randall Carver, Joby Baker and Philip Charles MacKenzie. (Also in the cast were future stars Phil Hartman and Bill Paxton.) The setting: Saigon, circa 1967, and the goings-on at an evening news show produced for the Armed Forces Vietnam Network. In her book *Up The Tube*, Sally Bedell Smith called some of the episodes "tasteless," citing one character "who imitated (President) Lyndon Baines Johnson singing the Rolling Stones hit *I Can't Get No Satisfaction*. One of Silverman's NBC colleagues—offended by another episode that showed soldiers upset about a rumour the war was ending because it would disrupt one of their scams—wondered "how can parents whose sons died in Vietnam watch that?" The answer: not too many.

NBC pulled the series after just two episodes in April 1980; two more aired during the summer and two other episodes were

never shown. It wasn't until 1987 that television again used Vietnam as the basis of not one but two series—ABC's *China Beach* and *Tour of Duty* on CBS. Of course, they were dramas.

Small Wonder - 1985



This unusual comedy is still fondly remembered by its fans—who made it a success despite paper-thin plots, second-rate stunts and an outlandish premise.

Ted Lawson (Dick Christie), a research engineer with United Robotronics, secretly developed a robot that looked just like a 10-year-old girl. Nicknamed Vicki (short for Voice Input Child Identicon), Ted brought the robot home to his wife Joan (Marla Pennington) and son Jamie (Jerry Supiran). Vicki herself was played by young Tiffany Brissette; she talked in a monotone and took anything anyone said literally—which resulted in embarrassment for Ted and the Lawson family, who

tried to hide Vicki's origins from the outside world—especially the nosy little neighbour Harriet Brindle (Emily Schulman), whose dad just happens to be Ted's co-worker at United Robotronics.

Critics hated the effort (the *BBC Comedy Guide* called it one of the worst low-budget sitcoms of all time). But *Small Wonder* was born at a time when there were few popular off-network sitcoms available for syndication; the show HAD to be produced on the cheap so it could be sold in the USA and around the world at a profit. By the end of the 1980's, there were finally enough repeats of good family sitcoms available to stations (such as *The Cosby Show* and *Who's The Boss*), and little incentive to keep *Small Wonder* in production.

Mike's Reviews A - Z

Supertrain - 1979



Many television critics consider this comedy-drama to be one of the worst series ever aired.

Conceived as NBC's answer to ABC's hit *The Love Boat*, it followed the same formula of an ensemble cast, big-name guest stars and several storylines in each episode. But instead of a cruise ship, the setting was a nuclear-powered train that took passengers from

New York City to Los Angeles (or vice versa) in just 36 hours.

The engineer steering *Supertrain* onto the small screen was Fred Silverman, the former and highly successful head programmer at both CBS and ABC. In early 1978, he accepted the job as president of NBC. His mandate was to turn the third-place network around; by the time he took control, NBC had just one series in the top ten--*Little House on the Prairie*. Silverman hired producer Dan Curtis (*Dark Shadows*) to get *Supertrain* up and running in just a matter of months—a project that normally would take at least a year.

NBC itself produced the series, which required elaborate sets (the *Supertrain* itself featured everything from swimming pools to a shopping centre, an exercise gym and a disco.) The ensemble cast included Edward Andrews as the conductor, Harry Flood; Robert Alda (father of Alan) played the train's doctor Dan Lewis; Ilene Graff was the social director Penny Whitaker; Harrison Page played porter George Boone, and Michael Delano was cast as the train's bartender Lou Atkins. But the series was cursed from the start. Curtis lost most of his workers because of the tremendous 24/7 effort to get the show filmed; the pilot script (which stole from such films as *The Prisoner of Zenda* and *Strangers on a Train*) was dashed off in a few weeks; and a six-thousand pound model of the *Supertrain* used for exterior shots was destroyed in a crash. Worst of all, the accelerated production meant that *Supertrain* had no high-profile guest stars to promote in the two-hour pilot that aired February 7th, 1979.

Thanks to an incessant and expensive promotional campaign, *Supertrain* did get about a third of the audience watching TV that evening. But curious viewers quickly tuned out (thanks to the weak script and confusing story), leading Silverman to fire Curtis and revamp the programme as *The All-New Supertrain!* But writer Sally Bedell Smith noted that even with changes in the format and cast, "the show had become such a joke that it would have been ignored even if Robert Redford had been chief engineer."

All told, *Supertrain* resulted in an expensive (\$5 million) failure for NBC and haunted Silverman until he was deposed as network president in 1981. The theme music (written by Bob Colbert) was actually recycled by NBC for a daytime game show called *Chain Reaction*, which probably summed up the entire *Supertrain* fiasco.



Ronald Reagan - The TV Years

2004



It can be safely said that Ronald Reagan's experience and visibility on the small screen (plus his film career of the 1930's, 40's and 50's) helped his future profession as a politician. Indeed, whether you agreed with his policies or not, you couldn't deny Reagan's photogenic appeal or his skilful use of television to get his messages across. Among modern presidents of the television era, only John Kennedy and Bill Clinton could come close to Reagan's mastery of the medium.

Ironically, Reagan turned to television as his film career began to wane in the early 1950's. (Probably his best known movie roles were in the 1942 drama "King's Row", where he uttered what would be the title to his future autobiography, "Where's the rest of me?"; and his performance as football player George Gipp in 1940's "Knut Rockne-All American".) With his second marriage to Nancy Davis and four children to raise, the actor had to work. Without much film work on his plate, Reagan broke ranks and began appearing on the new medium.

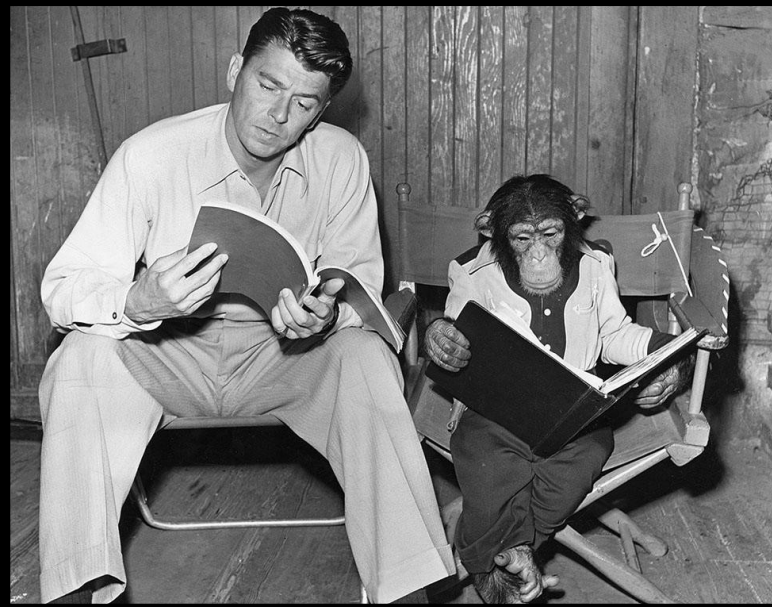
While his initial TV appearance came on the CBS dramatic anthology "Nash Airflyte Theater" in 1950, Reagan's first regular TV gig was an ABC entry called "The Orchid Award". Described as a 15-minute musical variety programme, Reagan was one of the show's hosts (Donald Woods would host on alternate weeks). The show itself was a biography that showcased singers and other performers, and followed gossip Walter Winchell on ABC's Sunday schedule from May 1953 until January 1954.

Mr. Reagan's most famous TV role came in the fall of 1954, when the giant talent agency MCA cast him as host of the CBS anthology "General Electric Theater". Reagan would introduce the weekly dramas and comedies and do an occasional pitch for GE products on the air. "GE Theater" proved to be the showcase for film actors who tried television for the first time; Joan Crawford and Fred Astaire made their TV debuts on the "Theater". (Reagan also appeared occasionally as an actor; he and Nancy Reagan co-starred in the 1958 "GE Theater"

presentation called "A Turkey For The President") During his eight years on the top-ten series, Reagan would visit General Electric plants to talk to employees and would stump around the country, talking about conservative business values on behalf of the company. The appearances helped sharpen Reagan's speaking and performance skills. They also helped shift his political horizons. A New Deal Democrat, Reagan became more conservative by the time "General Electric Theater" dropped him as host in 1962; that year he switched party affiliations and became a Republican.

In 1964, Reagan made his last film called "The Killers" (co-starring Angie Dickinson and Lee Marvin). Originally set to become the first in what would later be called "made for television films", it was deemed too violent for TV and was released to theatres. Also that year, Reagan made a last-minute pitch for the conservative Republican presidential candidate Barry Goldwater.

On October 27th, 1964, Reagan spoke on behalf of Goldwater in the nationally televised speech entitled "A Time For Choosing". While it raised more than a million dollars for Goldwater, Lyndon Johnson still won the presidency. Political columnist David Broder called Reagan's performance "the most successful political debut since William Jennings Bryant electrified the 1896 Democratic convention with his 'Cross of Gold' speech". Fellow conservatives urged Reagan to run for governor of California. That's exactly what he did in 1966. By this time, Reagan returned to television, as host of the syndicated western drama "Death Valley Days". As in "GE Theater", he introduced the show, occasionally acted in the half-hour series, and even pitched for his sponsor, U.S. Borax. (One commercial for the powdered hand soap Boraxo featured Reagan's daughter Patti, who told the audience that Boraxo "washes the whole family's hands really clean and leaves them soft and smooth".)



When Reagan became California's newest governor in the fall of 1966, he left "Death Valley Days" behind and moved on to his second career. (During the campaign, incumbent Governor Pat Brown complained that the Reagan-hosted "Death Valley Days" episodes served as commercials for his rival; the shows were taken off the air in California during the election. Ditto such Reagan films as "Bedtime for Bonzo", which may have even helped his campaign!)

Even as a politician, Reagan didn't abandon television. During his two terms as governor, he appeared on such variety programmes as "The Carol Burnett Show"; "The Sonny and Cher Comedy Hour" and was actually the subject of a 1973 Dean Martin roast that aired on NBC.

Although he failed to win the Republican presidential nomination in 1976, Reagan came back strong four years later to defeat incumbent Jimmy Carter, and go on to two terms in the White House. His entry into office was the stuff of television legend. "Washington Post" columnist Tom Shales noted that "his 1981 inaugural festivities were the most TV-intensive ever, since American hostages were being released by Iran even as the president was about to take the oath of office and send Jimmy Carter back to Plains, Georgia. What is normally a strictly ceremonial event became red-hot riveting television. There was speculation in later years about how the timing managed to be so convenient and dramatic; however it happened, it was an incredible send-off for a new administration, one that would use television more fluently than any other up to that time."

Indeed, Reagan's lasting legacy as president will likely be his use of television to win support for his policies. He understood, probably better than most other presidents of the TV age, that what is shown is sometimes more important than what is said. Reagan displayed an image of a man in charge and firm convictions; with his rugged looks and smooth voice, he was able to articulate the direction he wanted to take the country. Americans like their presidents to be optimists rather than pessimists; if Jimmy Carter was the latter, Ronald Reagan was clearly among the former.

People liked what was shown on their TV sets; Reagan proved to be a natural charmer for the medium. But telegenic attributes could only

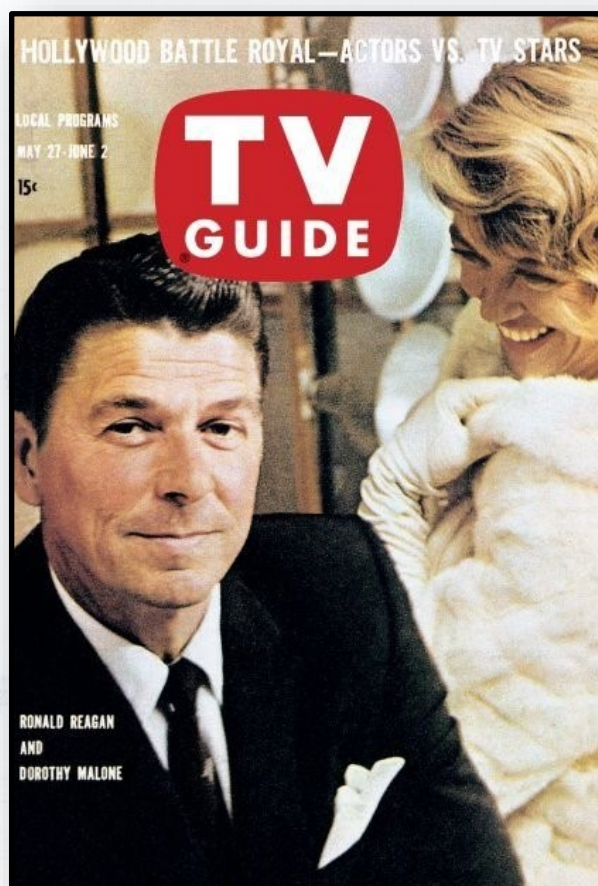
take Reagan so far; they failed him during the Iran-Contra crisis of 1986-87, which nearly derailed his presidency. Still, like the hero in many of Reagan's films, he managed to survive politically and leave office with his popularity nearly intact.

There was a downside to the 40th President's use (some would say manipulation) of television: Complex issues now had to be reduced to short soundbites or visual images; future politicians would have to master the medium to stay in office or gain support for their policies. It was a lesson Bill Clinton (for better or worse) quickly learned; it was one Reagan's successor, George H.W. Bush failed to master. Television will also likely determine whether American voters will stick with the current policies of George W. Bush, or go for a different direction with John Kerry.

It would have been interesting to learn how Mr. Reagan felt about today's political climate. In 1994, he made his last public appearance before succumbing to a life of helplessness, a victim of Alzheimer's disease. It was a role none of us ever expected for the former president, one that, sadly, marked what he called the "sunset" of his life.

In an interview with ABC's Barbara Walters after his presidency, she asked Mr. Reagan what he hoped his legacy would be. The former president replied, "I hope it'll remember me on the basis that when I took office, I felt very strongly that our government had grown too officious and imposing too much on the private sector in our society, and that I wanted to see if the American people couldn't get back that pride, and that patriotism, that confidence, that they had in our system. And I think they have."

Indeed, no matter what you thought of his policies, Ronald Reagan was the persona of American pride, patriotism and confidence. It showed in public and on television. And it remains a hard act to follow.



Mike's Reviews A - Z

Sports Night - 1988



Aaron Sorkin's first television series venture was this comedy-drama about the staff of a cable sports network.

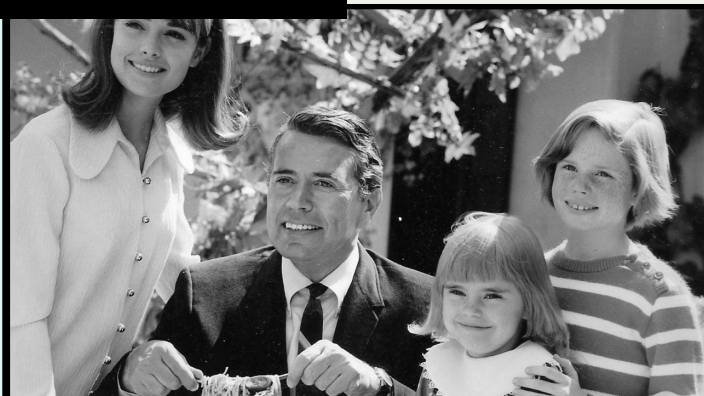
Peter Krause and Josh Charles played Casey McCall and Dan Rydell, co-anchors of *Sports Night*, a wrap-up of the day's sporting events on the Continental Sports Channel. The show's managing editor was Isaac Jaffe (Robert Guillaume); its executive producer was the harried but very competent Dana Whitaker (Felicity Huffman). Other major players in the cast included associate producers Natalie Hurley (Sabrina Lloyd) and Jeremy Goodwin (Joshua Malina).

Sports Night set what would become the style of Sorkin's future series --the talk and walk (where the characters chat while on the move); fast-paced dialogue; and the use of current events as the basis of plot developments. Another Sorkin trademark was the male-female relationships: Natalie and Jeremy quickly became an item (though the relationship had its ups and downs); there was a strong on-again, off-again attraction between Casey and Dana; and newly divorced Dan had problems getting back into the dating scene. During the show's first season, Guillaume suffered a stroke; he eventually returned to work and his real-life illness was effectively worked into the character of Isaac Jaffe.

Sports Night originally aired with a laugh track, but Sorkin pressured ABC to dump the canned laughs; they became fewer by the end of the first season and were eliminated altogether during Season Two.

Though admired by critics for its fine writing and ensemble acting, *Sports Night* was never a big hit. Several cable networks wanted to continue the show after ABC cancelled it. But Sorkin decided to concentrate on his new NBC drama *The West Wing* and passed on the opportunity. (He would later return to television as the setting for drama and comedy in the short-lived *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip*). Most of the main actors did quite well after *Sports Night*: Krause later starred in *Six Feet Under* and *Parenthood*; Charles became a cast member of *The Good Wife*; Huffman found success as Lynette Scavo on *Desperate Housewives*; and Malina joined the *West Wing* cast as a replacement for the departed Rob Lowe during Season Four.

To Rome with Love - 1969



John Forsythe (post-*Bachelor Father*; pre-*Charlie's Angels* and *Dynasty*) starred in this gentle situation comedy from Don Fedderson, the man who brought viewers *My Three Sons* and *Family Affair*.

Forsythe played Michael Endicott, a widowed college professor living in Iowa with three growing daughters--Alison (Joyce Menges); Penny (Susan Neher) and Mary Jane (Melanie Fullerston). His wife's death led Michael to take a teaching job at the American Overseas School in Rome. Despite their reluctance, the girls agreed to live in Italy. Michael's single sister Harriet (Kay Medford) went with the family during the first season, always trying to get them to return to Iowa. Peggy Mondo and Vito Scotti played

neighbours Mama Vitale and Nico.

To Rome with Love was a marginal performer in its first season, but CBS renewed the series for a second year after Medford was replaced by veteran character actor Walter Brennan (*The Real McCoys*). He played Andy Pruitt, Michael's father-in-law who came for a visit and stayed indefinitely. Unfortunately, such was not the case for the series, which ended in September 1971. For its second season, *To Rome with Love* moved from Sunday nights to Tuesdays. In January 1971, it was moved--again--to Wednesday nights, making room for a new sitcom on Tuesdays at 9:30 PM. That comedy, *All in the Family*, went on to become one of the most successful and controversial series in US television history.

Mike's Reviews A - Z

The Ugliest Girl in Town - 1968



Back in the days when ABC was an also-ran network, it had the habit of scheduling one or two really bad shows on its fall schedule every year. Some were silly but caught on (*The Flying Nun*, for instance). Others were so bizarre, they defied description—not to mention how they got on the air in the first place.

Such was the case with *The Ugliest Girl In Town*—a 1968 sitcom that fused the world of fashion models and cross-dressing more than two decades before RuPaul and *Supermodel*. It was bad—and not in a “good” way, either. In 2002, *TV Guide* ranked “Girl” 18th on its list of the 50 worst television shows ever.

To describe the show was simple: Boy meets girl....boy loses girl...boy dresses up as girl to be with girl. Sounds silly? Read on.

Timothy Blair (played by Peter Kastner) was a gofer at a talent agency who happened to meet actress Julie Renfeld (Patricia Brake). Sparks fly and love ensues after a series of events. Unfortunately, Julie must return to her native England, and Timothy can't afford to follow her. Then Timothy's brother Gene (played by Gary Marshall—NOT the producer and director of the same name) is contracted to take pictures for a London-based magazine. He screws up the photos and by desperation, Gene asks Timothy to dress up as a hippie (this was 1968, after all) and wear a wig with long hair. Some idiot at the magazine apparently thought Timothy with his fake hair was a WOMAN named Timmie, and figured “she” would become the next Twiggy. Of course, Timmie/Timothy and Gene head to swinging London for a series of photo shoots with talent agency chief David Courtney (Nicolas Parsons). Naturally, Timothy (as Timmie) finds Julie again, and the two resume their relationship.

But again, another complication: Gene ends up owing money and Timothy/Timmie must stay in London to help pay his brother's debt. Plus, Courtney finds out Timmie is actually Timothy, and forces Timothy/Timmie to stay in the UK by threatening to report him to the police until Courtney makes his money from his hot new modelling find. The good news is that Timothy can be with Julie. The bad news is that Timothy can only be with Julie in public as Timmie—which leads to even more (unanswered) questions about two women spending so much “quality” time together!

My suspicion was that “Ugliest Girl” was picked up by ABC because it was produced by Columbia's Screen Gems studio (which also produced “Flying Nun” and ABC's biggest series hit of the time, “Bewitched”). In fact, ABC slotted “Girl” on Thursdays at 7:30 PM, followed by “Flying Nun,” “Bewitched,” “That Girl” and a short-lived science fiction series called “Journey To The Unknown.” Another plus was that “Ugliest Girl” was filmed in London, which reduced production costs and made it a relative bargain. Topping it all off was the show's soft-rock theme song written by Howard Greenfield and Helen Miller, who also wrote such true pop classics as Gene Pitney's “It Hurts To Be In Love” and “Foolish Little Girl” by the Shirelles. Performed on the series by a group called the “Wall-O-Bees,”



The Ugliest Girl In Town premiered on September 26th, 1968. But viewers preferred to watch the more masculine *Daniel Boone* on NBC. As a result, Timothy/Timmy Blair and his adventures ended with the January 30th, 1969 episode.

Twelve years later, ABC would try the cross-dressing sitcom again with *Bosom Buddies*, which put Tom Hanks and Peter Scolari in drag at a hotel for women. It ran for two seasons, and launched Hanks' very successful film career. Not to mention the fact that *Bosom Buddies* was actually quite funny—unlike the femme fatality that was *The Ugliest Girl In Town*.

Mike's Reviews A - Z

Window on Main Street - 1961



One year after *Father Knows Best* ended production, Robert Young and his partner Eugene Rodney returned to series television in this gentle comedy-drama.

This time around, Young played Cameron Garrett Brooks, a widowed author who returned to his hometown of Millsburg to continue work on his novel (which shared the show's title). Cameron found his stories among the residents of Millsburg, who included newspaper editor Lloyd Ramsey (Ford Rainey), his secretary Christina Logan (Constance Moore) and her son Army (Brad Berwick). A young Tim Matheson also appeared as 13-year-old Roddy Miller.

CBS had high hopes for the series; it was slotted on Monday nights just before the top-ten *Danny Thomas Show*, and *Father Knows Best* old sponsor Scott Paper Company signed on as alternating sponsor with Toni (maker of home permanents and other beauty aids). Like *FKB*, *Window on Main Street* was filled with pathos, humour, and a moral for each episode. But up against NBC's *The Price is Right* and *The Rifleman* on ABC, *Window on Main Street* lasted just one season.

Another factor: During the 1961-62 season, CBS was also airing reruns of *Father Knows Best* in prime time; viewers were more interested in Young's old series than his new venture. *Window On Main Street* has resurfaced with episodes (complete with original commercials) as part of the DVD *Father Knows Best* collections. Each episode of *Father Knows Best* and *Window on Main Street* ended with the crest of Rodney-Young Enterprises (the company owned by Robert Young and Eugene Rodney that produced both series). The crest featured the motto "Ars Pro Multis"—which is Latin for "Art for The Masses"!



The VCR: How One Device Changed the Way the World Watched TV a 2005 article



Aside from television, no one device has transformed our entertainment habits more than the video cassette recorder. Before the VCR became universal in homes around the world, we were tied to what the networks wanted us to watch, when they chose to air it.

But thanks to time shifting, that favourite prime time series can now be kept on tape and viewed at your convenience. And thanks to videotape, our favourite films and television programs were made available for sale or rent, creating a new revenue stream for Hollywood (and giving us more viewing options in the process).

It's been 30 years since the first successful home video cassette recorder hit the marketplace. But the VCR is about to become extinct, thanks to the evolution of hard-drive machines such as TiVo, and the growing number of DVD recorders. With falling prices and more convenience, the shiny discs are making the videocassette look old-fashioned.

It's hard to remember what a miracle the VCR was when it first came out. My first glimpse at a home machine came in early 1979, when I went to a party held by one of the best professors I ever came across. Alan Padderud taught broadcasting at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, where I graduated with a B.A. in communications. He was quick with a quip; a bit of a cross between Ted Koppel and "Mad's" Alfred E. Newman. But I worshiped him because we both loved television. That night, Al took me into a room at his home, and proudly pointed out his Panasonic Omnivision VCR, complete with taped episodes of SCTV and other favourite shows. From that moment, I made it my destiny to have my own VCR.

Five years later, I purchased my first video recorder—an Hitachi VHS model (\$550 in 1983 dollars) with the optional (\$30) remote control. It wasn't wireless—you had to run the cord to the VCR, but it worked just as well. Like Al Padderud, I taped SCTV. And episodes of Hill Street Blues, along with the occasional Dynasty and cable movie. I also taped the final episode of M*A*S*H that aired on February 28th, 1983. (The original tape is still in very good condition after more than two decades!)

Over the years I have owned no less than five VCR's, including my current machine, a General Electric hi-fi model I bought in 1996 because it was rated a Best Buy in "Consumer Reports"! (It's still working great nearly ten years later.) I also bought a Magnavox combo TV/VCR for my bedroom to save space.

Even though the Japanese succeeded with home video recorders, it was America that gave the world videotape recording. The first Ampex reel-to-reel videotape machines that were sold to the television industry in 1956 were big, bulky devices that took up a whole wall.

Over the years, commercial videotape machines became more compact and easier to use and edit. The first home VTR machine was sold in the U.S. came from Japan's Sony. Its model CV-2000 was heavy, produced relatively poor quality pictures, and was complicated to use; as a result, not many were sold—especially with a price tag of \$1,000 in 1964 dollars.

With the advent of audio cassettes in the mid-1960's, electronics firms began looking at ways to make home video easier to use and cheaper to buy. Sony didn't let the failure of the CV-2000 stop it; it brought out U-Matic, a videocassette with a 1 1/2 inch tape. It proved to be a success with educators and industry, and had a small foothold in some upper-income households. But U-Matic wasn't the solution.

Unlike many other firms such as RCA and Zenith, which saw video machines as devices to play pre-recorded material, Sony felt home video would be a success if owners could use the VCR to tape their favourite programmes from broadcast TV. Indeed, Sony founder Akio Morita noted that "people do not have to read a book when it is delivered. Why should they have to see a TV programme when it is delivered?"



Sony wasn't the first company to produce a VCR for the home. Dutch electronics giant Philips introduced its own tape format for the N1500, which went on sale in Europe back in 1972. It could initially record up to 45 minutes and had a built-in analog clock that let you record a programme at least 24 hours in advance. Only 35 thousand of the machines were sold, but Philips' competitors were watching. There were several other tape formats in the US and overseas, but they never caught on.

In 1975, Sony launched Betamax, the first successful home VCR. It came in two models—one with a built-in television, and the other which could be easily hooked up to an existing TV. The stand-alone model proved to be a success, despite a price tag out of reach of most buyers. It used a newly designed 1 1/2 inch cassette (the Beta format) and could record for one hour. Gradual improvements eventually allowed Beta machines to tape up to 4 1/2 hours, though with lower picture quality. Around the same time, several other VCR formats were introduced, but they eventually gave way to Beta and its most formidable rival.

In 1976, Japan's JVC came up with its own 1 1/2 inch tape format, VHS (Video Home System). VHS initially had the time advantage over Beta; it could record a two-hour movie while Beta was limited to one hour at first. It soon became apparent the real format battle would be waged between Sony and JVC. Most experts say Beta had the technical edge in providing a slightly better picture. But VHS quickly gained market share in the late 1970's for several reasons. VHS machines would eventually record up to eight hours on a cassette; and JVC was more aggressive in signing up such electronics giants as RCA, Panasonic, and even Philips, which eventually abandoned its slow-selling VCR format (V2000) for VHS. By 1980, VHS captured a 70 percent share of the VCR market, more than three times Beta's share.

Few American electronic firms made their VCR's domestically; they turned to Asian partners. When RCA introduced its SelectaVision VHS model in 1977, it was essentially a Panasonic Omnivision made by Panasonic's parent Matsushita overseas. Rebates and free pre-recorded tapes helped RCA take the lead in American VCR sales from Sony.

The VCR was nearly derailed over the issue of copyrights. Soon after Sony's introduction of Betamax, Universal and Disney studios filed a lawsuit, claiming home videotaping was a violation of copyright law. The battle ended in 1984, when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that taping copyright-protected shows for home use was legal, as was the sale of VCR's.

Meanwhile, another use for the VCR was coming into play. A growing number of consumers wanted to watch their favourite movies at home. Studios initially priced the most recent films at around \$100. But a Los Angeles businessman named George Atkinson came up with a new concept. His new store, "The Video Station", opened in 1977. It rented movies to consumers; the concept proved to be such a hit that Atkinson sold McDonald's-like franchise agreements for "Video Stations" in other cities. Mom and pop stores soon sprung up. Giants emerged in the video rental industry such as Blockbuster. The film industry took note and stepped up the offerings of their libraries for sale. As a result, prices for films and other pre-recorded videos came down in price, leading more people to buy and start their own collections.



Another unexpected change came when the adult movie industry began the switchover from film to videotape. Hard-core sex films could now be purchased by mail or rented at selected stores; the video revolution all but sunk the old X-rated theatre, which was just about the only place people could see adults engaging in sexual acts. No more viewing adult material in public places; seduction and lust was as close as your VCR. That fact helped the adult video market grow over the past few decades.

During the 1980's, sales of VCR's grew and prices dropped. High-quality sound, wireless remotes and the advent of on-screen programming helped VCR's become easier to use—though many a comic still got laughs when referring to the “flashing 12:00” time display on VCR's owned by the technology-challenged.

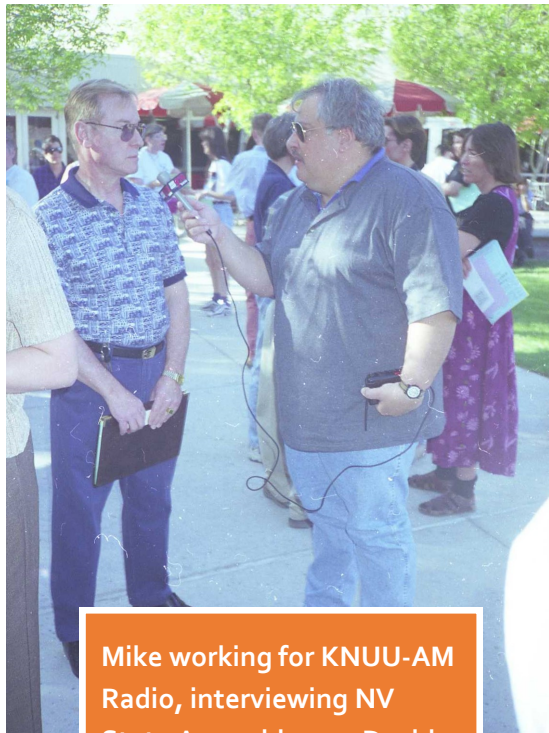
As VHS machines continued to dominate, some video stores decided to keep costs down and offer only VHS tapes for rent. That led frustrated Beta owners to either search for a Beta friendly store, or to dump their machine for a VHS model. The same cost-cutting mentality also led studios to stop issuing new releases in Beta—it was VHS or nothing. The HQ format soon allowed VHS machines to rival Beta in picture quality, and the hi-fi format gave them sound that rivalled audio CD's. Beta had become a niche player, and VHS won the format battle.

Sony saw the handwriting on the wall, and introduced its first VHS machine in the late 1980's; nearly a decade later, it abandoned Beta altogether. Meanwhile, the advent of DVD players meant people could watch movies and other pre-recorded material in crystal-clear picture quality with state-of-the-art audio. Falling prices for DVD recorders are encouraging more and more tape users to begin transferring their collections from VHS to the silver disks. Already, one electronics chain in the UK—Dixons—has stopped selling video recorders. In the US, stores such as Best Buy, Circuit City and Fry's have fewer VCR models to choose from, with prices at their lowest levels ever. Most of the VCR sales action has gone to such mainstream discount stores as Wal-Mart, Target and Sears. But even those stores are stocking more DVD players and recorders, along with combination DVD players and VCR player/recorders.

Many Americans, such as myself, have learned to coexist with the two formats—using the VCR for recording, and switching over to DVD for pre-recorded material. Soon, there will be a time when I'll buy a DVD recorder and possibly a hard drive system for day-to-day taping operations. But with my large collection of videotapes, it's inevitable that I'll end up buying another VCR when my current machine gives up the ghost.

After 20 years, some habits are just too hard to break.





Mike working for KNUU-AM Radio, interviewing NV State Assemblyman David Parks © Dennis McBride

DEAREST MIKE

God willing (or whoever you believe in) and as long as I survive the second cold I've had in four weeks - we will be in LV on 12th August.

That's the night we are booked up for the Beatles Show, but on the 13th it would be nice if we could meet up somewhere. I'll have a car so I can drive to anywhere you want to meet up.

Big Hugs

Laurence (27th July 2011)

Dearest Laurence:

So good to hear you'll be in Vegas next month. You'll enjoy the Beatles LOVE (Kevin took me to the show for Christmas and it was super)! I should be free on the 13th, so we can get together at any place you choose. We can decide on a location as the date draws nearer.

In the meanwhile, you get some rest and get rid of that cold; the bright lights and showgirls of the Strip are waiting for you--along with your money! Best to you and the boys!

Love and affection, Mike

It was always a joy to receive an email or a Skype call from Mike. He really was the dearest person. His love of television shone through in all of his writing, and his knowledge was second to none. He always had interesting things to tell but was just as interested in what was happening in his friends' lives. I know I'm not alone in missing him and this issue of TVH is for all of those friends as well as the big man himself. It's a reminder of what we are missing but, more importantly, a celebration of what we had.

Almost exactly a year after the above email exchange Mike posted the following on Facebook: *To all my friends: In May, I was diagnosed with breast cancer. Yesterday (7/10), I underwent a mastectomy at Spring Valley Hospital. The operation took about 90 minutes; I awoke a few hours later. Good news: Doctor's prognosis is excellent. Will learn in the next few weeks whether I will undergo chemo, but the cancer was apparently confined to one area of the left breast. Keven has been a blessing, taking care of me and allowing me to rest and get as much sleep as I need. I promise updates as needed--but just to let you know, breast cancer can strike men as well as women. Over the next few years, Mike had his ups and downs but in January 2017 we were to receive more bad news: 2017 isn't starting off very well. Just before Xmas, I underwent PET and cat scans. Sorry to say, my breast cancer modules have increased. Don't cry--prognosis is very good, but I'm feeling somewhat fatigued, and experienced nausea on the first day. But I've kicked cancer's ass before, and I'll do it again. It's a marathon, not a sprint. So say a prayer for me, and I'll keep you posted on my progress.*

Mike's final post was on 17th July 2017: *On April 27, I fell on my living room floor due to a heavy duty dose of chemo to reduce my breast cancer markers. As a result, I have been hospitalized since 4-27. I'm currently in a rehab center where I'm relearning to walk and move again. I'm making great progress and expect to be home by July. 4th if not sooner! Please keep me in your thoughts and prayers as i work towards recovery and being home with Kevin Febro and our Boston Terriers.*

This special edition of TVH is, I believe, one of the most important issues to date. It gives Mike's friends, and the wider world, an opportunity to appreciate Mike's incredible contribution to online reporting as well as preserving the history of television in print, something that he was a great advocate of. In return, and if you have enjoyed reading this issue, I have one simple request. Please go online and make a donation, no matter how small, to any one of the numerous cancer charities that abound. Or donate some clothing or unwanted goods to a charity. Make a difference by helping them to make a difference.

Dearest Mike,
Big Hugs,
Laurence xxx