

TV'S GREATEST SITCOMS

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Excerpts from CHAPTER ONE

TV'S MOST INFLUENTIAL SITCOMS

What is the greatest TV sitcom of all time? *Seinfeld*? *I Love Lucy*? *The Simpsons*? *All in the Family*? Everyone seems to have his or her own opinion as to what were the great sitcoms, often associating a particular show with a specific time of life that emotionally meant something to them. We hum the theme songs, repeat the funny phrases, and even copy of the behavior of the characters that have become our living room friends. Sitcoms are the most popular type of programming on the most influential medium in history and have had a major impact on how we think and what we think about.

Television is a cultural reference point for most of us, a type of shorthand that makes it easy to carry on a conversation. Columnist Ellen Goodman wrote that to those born since the baby boom of the late '40s, "All history begins with television." We compare ourselves to those on TV, we change how we dress and cut our hair and talk based on the latest television trend. Viewers pick up catch phrases and turn them into sidesplitting party parodies that in turn become part of our culture. "Not," as Jerry Seinfeld would say, "that there's anything wrong with that!"

Over time sitcoms acquire a kind of second life, where people who don't even watch a show perceive the program as being extremely influential. "Everyone watched Seinfeld" is a common misconception when in reality only around 20 percent of the population was tuned in on any given week. "*Malcolm in the Middle* is the hot new show," people shouted in 2000, yet it finished its first season in 19th place with less than 15 percent of America watching and soon lost almost half of those viewers. The media reported that *Sex and the City* was "a huge hit," but the ratings showed that only seven million people watched out of a population of over 280 million people—that's less than three percent!

The truth is few of the situation comedies in the history of television have had much long-term cultural impact. While *Frasier* was a darling of the critics, was almost always near the top of the Nielsen ratings in the mid-'90s, and holds the record for winning the most Emmy Awards, only about 18 percent of the people in America regularly watched the show at its peak and 25 years from now viewers may wonder why it's being rerun in the middle of the night on TV Land.

How can a critically acclaimed series like *Frasier* end up having less cultural impact than a show like TGIF teen show *Boy Meets World*? The difference can be seen in examples from 1957: the highest-rated sitcom on TV at that time was the #2-ranked *Danny Thomas Show* (also known as *Make Room for Daddy*) while the Emmy winner that year for Best Comedy was Phil Silvers' *You'll Never Get Rich* (which it would win three years in a row). Neither of these shows are familiar to viewers below the age of 50 today

and on the rare occasions when the reruns air, modern audiences wonder why people watched in the first place—Danny Thomas comes across as a harsh caricature and Phil Silvers' scheming Sgt. Bilko is based on a one-joke premise.

However, there is one series from 1957 that was cancelled by CBS in its first season, never appeared in the top 25 of the ratings, was ridiculed by critics, and didn't win any major awards—yet it continues to air successfully in reruns today. *Leave it to Beaver* was a flop when it first went on the air, though ABC picked up the cancelled show after its first season and ran it for another five years without any ratings success. Though it didn't win an Emmy and didn't make the top 30 of the ratings, *Beaver* is the only TV series from the late '50s that people still watch and even remember today. It was one of TV Land's five highest rated shows in 2002 and modern pop culture writers make hundreds of references a year to the Cleavers as the quintessential '50s family.

Though some older critics may place *You'll Never Get Rich* on their "best sitcom" lists, the series had no serious long-term impact. *Make Room for Daddy*, the highest-rated comedy of the late '50s, is so forgotten today that one web site devoted to television history failed to even list it among 2000 shows because the site creator/TV expert had never heard of the show! Instead it's the under-appreciated *Beaver* that deserves a place on the list of sitcoms with the greatest impact due to the amount of cultural influence it has acquired over the years.

There are similar examples from other years: *Get Smart* was highly rated in the mid-'60s, won the Best Comedy Emmy twice, and appears on many critics' lists of greatest TV shows of all time. Yet few under the age of 50 can recall anything from the series. Instead, a low-rated show from the same time period has had long-term impact: *Gilligan's Island*. Even CBS executives that aired the series about seven stranded castaways hated the show and were embarrassed that it was on the top-ranked network. But today most Americans can sing the theme song, name the characters, and theorize why it took them so long to get off the island. The sitcom even spawned a new generation of island-themed shows, like the TV series *Survivor* and the Tom Hanks movie *Cast Away*, 35 years after the original series was on the air.

It happened again in the early '70s. There is no doubt that *All in the Family* changed the course of television, but similar groundbreaking, highly-rated, award-winning series such as *Sanford & Son*, *Maude*, *Chico & the Man* and *One Day at a Time* have failed to be successful in reruns. Instead it is a corny little series about a blended family that we still talk about it today. *The Brady Bunch* never won an Emmy, never made a list of the greatest TV shows of all time, never even ranked in the top 30 of the ratings, and yet almost every person in America can recall the personalities and plots of this family series that has continued to influence generations.

Influential sitcoms are those that either made a major contribution to the genre when they initially aired, such as when *All in the Family* contemporized the format, or shows that years later hold long-term appeal generation after generation, such as *The Brady Bunch* gaining new viewers on Nick at Nite's TV Land.

Do not mistake innovation for influence. Many innovative sitcoms have had little or no long-term impact on the situation comedy genre. The groundbreaking, highly-rated *Maude* was critically praised but has had little long-term impact. Shows such as *Days and Nights of Molly Dodd*, *Ellen*, and *Ally McBeal* were innovative but not influential. The most recent examples are *Sex and the City* and *Will and Grace*, which critics point to as introducing previously taboo subject matter. But the cultural influence of such shows has so far been limited to a small number of faithful viewers. The real test of time will be whether these programs attract a large audience in syndication, if they inspire copycat series, and if their characters or phrases hold a place in American culture decades from now.

The problem is that a show's success with critics can bring it perceived influence that it may not really have. Media reviewers and television columnists tend to peg as "brilliant" a show that is simply different. If a new comedy series premieres and is "cutting edge" or out of the ordinary, critics begin to praise it. A new show that breaks moral boundaries is immediately placed on the "must see" list and often wins Emmys.

As the media hype builds for the show, writers go beyond objective reviews to actually using their newspapers and magazines to push a controversial sitcom into the limelight so that more people will watch. Soon critics name often undeserving series to the "greatest shows of all time" list. It doesn't just happen with sitcoms but with dramas, music videos, albums, books, etc. But, as *USA Today* critic Robert Bianco pointed out when VH-1 ranked 2003 hit *American Idol* above the classic '60s specials from Barbra Streisand on a list of the greatest musical moments of all time, "This is what happens when you combine the work of young writers who don't know any better with that of adults who are trying to appear hip."

Critics incorrectly associate "cutting edge" with "creative." Soon the public perception is that an immoral, quirky, unrealistic comedy is something all of America accepts as being one of the greatest of all time. Recent examples include *Sex and the City* and *Will & Grace*—shallow and often poorly written series that tackled topics unusual for television, resulting in critical praise and Best Comedy Emmy Awards. These shows were hyped as being influential by the Hollywood community but as yet have had little long-term impact on the situation comedy genre.

If you doubt it then try to remember a show called *Dream On* that started on HBO in 1990 and ran for six years. It was made by the people who would later create *Friends*. *Dream On* had all the innovations that critics and Emmy voters love: a sex-hungry New York divorced book editor who would often daydream using clips of old movies and TV shows. The series contained nudity, scenes of drug use, loving-making threesomes, and R-rated profanity—the media insiders loved it. And no one watches it today. It's because a hyped "cutting edge" show rarely has long-lasting impact to the general audience.

Coming up with a list of the 20 most influential situation comedies is a no-win prospect since people have their own favorites. So for this book a cross-section of critics' lists and surveys of the America public was reviewed to pull together the shows that were most often named as the "best" or the "favorite." Using *TV Guide*, *Entertainment Weekly*, communication books, internet sites and lists put together by print

critics, then adding my own opinion from years of teaching college courses on the subject, I assembled the most influential television sitcoms of the past 50 years.

It's interesting to note that whenever a list comes out of the greatest movies of all time, most of the top ten films are older and they seem to gain reputation with time. But the same not true for television. Modern critical lists place TV shows from the '80s and '90s near the top of the "greatest" list while condemning older sitcoms as "old fashioned" or "unrealistic." The E! cable network's 2002 list of the 25 greatest sitcoms of all time included current comedies *Will & Grace*, *Everybody Loves Raymond* and *Sex and the City* while ignoring classics like *Leave it to Beaver*. Today's media critics and viewers have little sense of the historical importance of the older comedies and fail to treat classic sitcoms with the same respect given to classic films.

The American Film Institute named the old-fashioned yet stereotype-filled *Some Like It Hot* from 1959 as its greatest movie comedy of all time, yet television critics cling to *Seinfeld* and *Friends* as being better than anything in the '50s. Those who say *Seinfeld* was the best situation comedy of all time reflect the political and cultural realities of the '90s by accepting showy attitude over substance. As Mike Gaynes wrote in *TV Guide*, "*Seinfeld* dismally fails the test of time that *I Love Lucy*, *The Honeymooners*, *All in the Family* and *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* have so brilliantly passed. Future generations will look back and wonder what people thought was so funny."

TV'S 20 MOST INFLUENTIAL SITCOMS

(Detailed explanations are included in the book)

1. *I LOVE LUCY*

2. *ALL IN THE FAMILY*

3. *MARY TYLER MOORE SHOW*

4. *M*A*S*H*

5. *THE COSBY SHOW*

6. *THE DICK VAN DYKE SHOW*

7. *SEINFELD*

8. *CHEERS*

9. *THE SIMPSONS*

10. *THE HONEYMOONERS*

11. *THE ANDY GRIFFITH SHOW*

12. *THE BRADY BUNCH*

13. *THE BEVERLY HILLBILLIES*

14. *LEAVE IT TO BEAVER*

15. *FRIENDS*

16. *GILLIGAN'S ISLAND*

17. *ROSEANNE*

18. *FAMILY TIES*

19. THE BOB NEWHART SHOW

20. TAXI

Other critical favorites that placed near the top of the list were *Happy Days*, *Bewitched*, *The Odd Couple*, *Will & Grace*, *Jack Benny*, *Get Smart* and even *The Monkees*. *Frasier* is the most notable modern omission from the list and there are those who rank it as one of the all-time great TV shows. The TV industry has made it the most-honored sitcom in history at the Emmy Awards. Yet what lasting impact has the show had? It is a spin-off that introduced nothing new or unique to the genre and was rarely copied by other '90s shows. The series is having difficulty keeping viewers in syndicated reruns and young adults have shown a strong dislike for the show. Give it 20 years to see whether the show belongs on this list or becomes another *You'll Never Get Rich*.

Excerpts from CHAPTER TWO

SITCOM STRUCTURES &
REALITY

No matter how one categorizes these programs or how much influence the new reality trend has on the medium, the fact remains that television comedies are not realistic. It's impossible—because TV is not reality.

The stories are pieces of the creator's perceptions that are always edited, filtered, and scripted. The worldview of those involved in making the program shapes how the real world is manipulated in order to attract an audience. TV comedies are not, to use the words of a summer 2001 ad for Nick at Nite's TV Land network, "100% sitcoms, 100% unreality." Every sitcom utilizes the creator's perception of reality.

So when a couple of real-life college-age friends ended up living across from each other in a New York apartment, they used their experiences of hanging out at a coffee shop to become the basis for the hit series *Friends*. When a rich black man and his highly educated wife struggled with parenting their five children, Bill Cosby's life story became the basis for the popular *Cosby Show*. Television producer Norman Lear's bigoted father was the basis for *All in the Family*. Carl Reiner's experiences writing for a '50s television variety show was turned into *The Dick Van Dyke Show*. Even simple real-life family struggles, such a kid cutting his own hair or breaking one of dad's golf clubs, was used as source material by the writers of *Leave It to Beaver*.

Almost every situation comedy is based on some threads of the real lives of those involved in creating the shows. Remember the 2002 comedy *Men, Women & Dogs* on the WB network? Probably not—it concerned four guys who hunt for "chicks" while walking their dogs. This ridiculous premise for a

series came from the real life of creator Rob Long, who says he looks for women while taking his dog out. Or how about that year's *Off Centre*, about a British stud and American doofus who share a New York apartment building with supermodels? It was another bomb that was called "semi-autobiographical," based on the life of the producers.

In 2003, failed sitcoms included *All of Us*, based on the blended family life of producers Will Smith and Jada Pinkett Smith, in which a man's wife and ex-wife become best friends. Then there was *I'm With Her*, created by Brooke Shields's husband Chris Henchy, about an average guy who begins dating a glamorous movie star after admiring her dog—just the way Henchy met Shields! Or there was the dramedy *Miss Match*, starring Alicia Silverstone, based on a real New York divorce attorney who also acts as a matchmaker. Include *All About the Andersons*, *Married to the Kellys*, and in all there were over a half dozen comedies that year based on real people—yet all were criticized as being preposterous and unbelievable.

How far are the networks willing to go to bring us "reality" in comedies? CBS actually considered a sitcom based on the aftermath of the 9/11 World Trade Center disaster, about a widow and widower brought together after losing spouses!

The fact is sitcoms from the 1950s to today are based on pieces of reality blown out of proportion to entertain the audience (even when reality isn't so entertaining). Most think "realistic" sitcoms have only been a recent phenomenon. Critics often point to *All in the Family* as the first contemporary sitcom to incorporate real-world issues into the plot. They then claim *Roseanne* was the first series to portray a realistic family. Even *The Cosby Show* was heralded as the "breakthrough into an unprecedented realism...widely regarded as a rare glimpse of truth," according to Mark Crispin Miller in *Watching Television*.

Verbally abusive, child-hating *Roseanne* was no more realistic than the well-behaved family on *The Donna Reed Show*. The much-praised *M*A*S*H* was no more a "real" depiction of war than was *Hogan's Heroes*. *Malcolm in the Middle* is no more a picture of a kid's life than was *Leave It to Beaver*. Everybody may love Raymond, but his family struggles are no more realistic than those of Jim Anderson on *Father Knows Best*. *Cosby's* wealthy Huxtable family was no more representative of reality than was *Amos 'n' Andy*. All were based on pieces of reality that were distorted for entertainment purposes.

Census information proves that most sitcoms from the 1950s did reflect the reality at the time. Back then 83% of the homes with children in America were what could be defined as "traditional," with both parents and children living in the same house. While today's critics laugh at the June Cleaver stereotype, 78% of the women with children didn't work outside the home in the '50s and 88% of those with kids under the age of six stayed home. One 1950s poll showed that 2/3's of all Americans disapproved of women working outside the home! So it wasn't just reality, it was a societal expectation!

Today over 2/3's of all women with children work outside the home and over half of all children in America are in daycare (compared to less than 10% in the '50s). So looking back at 1950s sitcoms with a 21st century lifestyle mentality often leads to the incorrect conclusion that those shows were "unrealistic."

On the other hand, since the introduction of contemporary issues sitcoms such as *All in the Family*, producers of comedy series have attempted to force changes in society by falsely portraying characters outside the majority as being “normal.” While single parents make for fun plot lines, the fact is about 2/3’s of all children in America today still live with their original two parents. And though *Cosby Show*’s upper class married couple may have been good role models for African Americans, they were not representative of reality. In 1984 a mere 17% of all lawyers were female and only 3% of all doctors were black. So *Cosby Show*, single parents, and other modern sitcom situations do not reflect the reality of most people in America.

The difference is that reality is in the eye of the beholder and it changes as society changes. While kids in the ‘50s could relate to Beaver being disciplined by a strict father, some children today may be able to better relate to the dysfunctional family that Malcolm lives in. While families fifty years ago were often run by authoritarian dads and stay-at-home moms like *Father Knows Best*, today’s families include more men who attempt to be more like the wisecracking Raymond henpecked by a bossy wife. And while most viewers over the age of 50 were raised at home by mothers who kept house like Donna Reed, today’s daycare children may feel more comfortable in the sloppy home led by sarcastic Roseanne.

For example, one college professor can relate to the lead character in *Frasier*: raised in a family of all-male siblings, he earned a graduate degree and became an academic while also working over 30 years in radio. For years he hosted his own talk show and lived in seven states. However, he strongly dislikes the *Frasier* series because he says “it seems totally unrealistic, from the fake radio station where you rarely hear anything come out of the speakers to the British physical therapist who spent too much time at the home of a man who seems to get around quite well on his own.” So the professor judges the show to be “unrealistic” because his similarity to Frasier’s background tells him that the series is not being honest. Others who have worked in radio or have academic backgrounds may have the opposite experience—they may love the show because they can relate to it as being realistic. And those who have never gone to graduate school or worked in radio may think that the series is totally “realistic” because the show reinforces the stereotypes they perceive to be true about a world they have not experienced. There is no right or wrong answer to the question of reality—each person views the television show from his or her own unique background.

People disagree over what is realistic on the tube because there are essentially two types of television reality: experiential reality and perceived reality.

Experiential reality is one that you have personally lived—the characters, emotions, situations, locations are all so vivid to you that you can attest to the fact that the show involves things you have experienced. Perceived reality involves shows about people and settings that you have not experienced but you assume that the televised stereotypes are someone else’s reality. A study by E. Graham McKinley found Midwesterners who watched *Beverly Hill 90210* considered the show to be realistic despite living nowhere near California, concluding that “TV is perceived as realistic not because it literally reproduces reality but because it reproduces the dominant sense of reality.”

For example, two female college students said that they found *Roseanne* to be “realistic.” That meant one of two things: either that Roseanne’s working-class lifestyle and trashy mouth were something the women had personally experienced or that the women had grown up in loving homes and they perceived that Roseanne was realistic assuming that others had experienced it. When asked about their upbringing, one said she had an aunt who ran her family just like Roseanne and the other grew up on a farm with loving parents that couldn’t have been more different from the television Conner family. So one based her view of TV reality on experience while the other based her belief that the show was realistic on her perception of a world she had not experienced.

Within each of these types of reality (experiential or perceived) viewers can choose to either RELATE to the reality or REJECT the reality by distancing themselves from it. If it is experienced reality, one can choose to either admire a television show that is like your life or can want to have nothing to do with it. Gerard Jones, author of the sitcom analysis book *Honey, I’m Home*, admitted that he grew up in a Cleaver-like ‘50s family with two loving but strict parents and he hated *Leave It to Beaver* because it reminded him of the upbringing from which he wanted to break free! He was rejecting the show based on his experienced reality—but that didn’t make the show unrealistic!

If the show is perceived reality, one can also filter it in such a way that you would either relate to it or reject it. Author Jones, who had a quiet, studious upbringing in California, said that his favorite ‘50s sitcoms had New York settings with rebellious male characters. He found shows like *Dobie Gillis* and *The Honeymooners* “realistic” only because they were so different from his own lifestyle and he accepted what he saw on television as someone else’s truth.

New York Times writer Caryn James illustrated this as well when she wrote a 2002 piece regarding the hottest new television comedy, in which the dysfunctional family fills the screen with four-letter words:

“*The Osbournes* are us....(They) reflect the language, ethnicity and blended relationships so familiar in life and so rare in the timid, backward-looking land of television...the way they talk is closer to the speech of Middle America than the sappy, stilted dialogue of regulation sitcom parents. Americans instantly and maybe unconsciously saw themselves in the Osbournes.”

The Osbournes reflect Middle America? The author could base this opinion on experiential reality (she grew up in a home where verbal abuse was accepted as love) or perceived reality (she thinks everyone in America talks and acts that way). But in many parts of the real Midwest only profanity-spewing under-educated druggies would consider *The Osbournes* to be reality. The series was a hit because Middle America viewers were fascinated at seeing the raunchy rock-and-roll family lifestyle most Americans had never experienced!

There is, however, a difference between reality and truth. *The Osbournes* may not be real to most people but viewers could relate to the elements of truth in the show regarding parents and teens. Americans laugh at *Ozzy*, *The Simpsons* and *Married with Children* not because the TV families are real to us, but because the shows contain caricatured pieces of truth that are magnified to absurdity. So when writers claim that sitcoms today reflect reality, they may mean to say that television now contains more pieces of

truth. The problem is that most of today's sitcoms are so busy magnifying the dysfunctional aspects of society in an attempt to be "realistic" that they often miss the truth.

New York Times columnist Frank Rich recently condemned the "propaganda" of shows like *Ozzie and Harriet*, claiming that functional television families of the 1950s were "unrealistic." Yet he revealed that he was raised in a home with a single, divorced mother who worked and later remarried. Rich's view of reality in the '50s was big city, divorce, single parent home and remarriage, and his condemnation of Midwestern functional traditional sitcom families reflects the fact that his view of reality wasn't represented on television before the 1970s. However, that does not negate the fact that for the vast majority of the population in the 1950s, *Ozzie and Harriet* did reflect the typical household with a money-earning dad and stay-at-home mom.

The same thing happened in a 1985 *TV Guide* article, in which Eric Levin ripped on *Leave It to Beaver* while praising *Father Knows Best*. Why the praise for *Father*? The author admitted, "It seemed more like life as I knew it than did *Beaver*." Writers, critics, and viewers, therefore, define sitcom "reality" by their own real world. Rob Owen writes in *Gen-X TV* that "*Friends* is the most realistic sitcom about Gen X life." Realistic? Three single men and three single women living it up in New York City on their meager salaries from part-time jobs, switching partners almost as often as they change the linens? That may be reality for the jet-set writers and producers of these shows but it is not reality for most of the rest of the country.

Owen also supports the point that most sitcoms are based on the "reality" of those who create the shows. Four of the series most mentioned as the greatest sitcoms ever revolve around the entertainment business: *Seinfeld*, *I Love Lucy*, *The Dick Van Dyke Show* and *Mary Tyler Moore Show*. The early success of industry-based shows led to many modern sitcoms about people who work in the media (*Frasier*, *Murphy Brown*, *Cybill*, *NewsRadio*, *Home Improvement*, *Martin*, *Mad About You*, *Full House*, *Dave's World*, *Suddenly Susan*, *Caroline in the City*, *Everybody Loves Raymond*, and even some *Friends* characters) "because most of the people who are writing for these shows are in their twenties or thirties and being a part of the media is all they've ever dreamed of; it's all they've known," Owen wrote. "No sitcoms are set on farms because it's not something TV show creators aspire to. They aspire to create TV shows, but when they get the chance to create a show, the only thing they know to make their show about is another aspect of the media because that's been their main preoccupation."

Namely, if TV is "reality," then where are the farmers? Where are the factory workers carrying their lunch pails? Where are those who bowl, which is the largest participant sport in the country? Where are the 42% of the people in America who go to religious services each week? Since the creators of these shows live upper class lifestyles in urban coastal cities, don't go to religious services and don't even know anyone who does, television ends up reflecting the distorted reality of those who make the shows.

If television truly wants to portray reality today, then there should be more middle class (which still make up the majority of the population in America), more clerical/sales workers (37% of the population), more southerners (over 1/4 of the population and growing), fewer extra-marital affairs (only

10% of the married population have them but over 90% of married TV characters have affairs), more racial diversity in sitcoms set in major cities (the ten largest cities in America are now 2/3 minority population), and more political conservatives (the 1996 and 2002 congressional elections were won by Republicans and the country has been led by Republican presidents during 36 of the 56 years television has been on the air). That reality is almost never seen on television comedies.

William Henry III wrote in *TV Guide*, “The basic message on the screen is that we are a pluralist society with everyone entitled to a place at the table,” yet only those who reflect the social, religious and political backgrounds of those creating the shows are allowed to pull up a chair!

TV Guide writer Joanmarie Kalter concluded that “themes of love, honesty and tolerance” are the morality that producers claim to promote yet they usually contradict those messages by spending most of their programs in verbal put-downs, deception and intolerance toward traditional and conservative values.

In other words, the “reality” that we are getting on television today is the stilted reality of the media elite—those who claim to want all viewpoints to be included while excluding the traditional family that they consider to be “fantasy.” The writers claim to provide moral messages regarding the environment or tolerance yet refuse to include anything conservative or spiritual unless it is ridiculed as a punch line to a joke. Producers promote the cause of feminism and “equality,” yet use their shows to condemn men as either powerless or unnecessary.

ABC Family Channel’s president Angela Shapiro even challenged what we consider as “family” in 2002 when she said, “*Friends* and *Will & Grace* come closer to defining family than *Ozzie and Harriet*.” She has no factual information to back her up—just her impression from being around the Hollywood community that the male/female parental unit with children no longer makes up the majority of families in America. Her misconception is not reality and reveals Hollywood’s distorted thinking.

The world of sitcom creators and network executives is not most people’s reality. As *USA Today* columnist Robert Bianco wrote, “TV creates its own reality.” The producers and writers use entertainment programs to promote a social agenda that will sooth their dysfunctional consciences while making them big bucks. For the rest of us, television is merely escapism—using bits and pieces of often tasteless real-world occurrences to allow us to escape from our boring lives and laugh at the unrealistic world Hollywood creates for us.

Excerpts from CHAPTER SIX

THE ENTERTAINING, EVERYWOMAN '80s

By the late seventies the creative, cutting-edge days of sitcoms had passed. Few innovative situation comedies were created during the period 1975 to 1982. It was a dry spell for creativity and the situation comedy format was dying because too many shows copied the irreverent Norman Lear comedies and abandoned functional family morality stories. In terms of raw numbers, there were certainly plenty of comedies on the air, but few did more than copy what had happened in the early part of the decade.

In 1979, nine of the top ten shows on television were situation comedies and it looked as if there was no end to the public's appetite for half hour humor. Yet the glut of junk food sitcoms resulted in a satiated viewing public. The television audience stuffed themselves with a visual feast that satisfied their hunger but found much of it to be less than nourishing and began pushing themselves away from the table.

In 1980 viewers began to look elsewhere to fill their entertainment appetite. Prime time soap operas, lead by *Dallas* and *Dynasty*, began a six-year reign atop the Nielsen ratings. Hour-long dramas, like *Magnum P.I.* and *The A-Team*, became more appealing than rehashed half hour comedies. By 1982, there were only three comedies on the top ten list, and during 1983-84, *Kate & Allie* was the only comedy among the 14 highest-rated shows on television and for one season the NBC network had no sitcoms on the top 30 list!

The Emmy awards handed out in the early '80s reflected television's dire straits: harsh, one-note Hot Lips Loretta Swit finally won Best Supporting Actress for *M*A*S*H*; after years of pratfalls John Ritter was named Best Actor for *Three's Company* near the end of that show's run; *Kate & Allie* won for Best Directing and Jane Curtin got the Best Actress award. Sure, low-rated *Cheers* was saved from cancellation in 1983 by winning an Emmy, as were dying '70s leftovers *Barney Miller* and *Taxi*, but when the biggest Emmy winner of the era was *Night Court's* forgettable John Larroquette, you know television had fallen on hard times.

Sitcoms were pronounced dead. In a famous July, 1984 story in *TV Guide*, gravestones were shown with the titles of situation comedies and the entire article was devoted to the question of whether viewers would ever be drawn to a situation comedy again. What Norman Lear created, Norman Lear had destroyed by copying himself so many times that viewers tired of family members screaming over contemporary issues. They were ready for diversion, for escapism. And hour-long dramas filled that need.

America had also changed in the dozen years that Lear's shows had been on the air. *All in the Family* reflected a country torn over the Vietnam War and even *One Day at a Time* mirrored the growing trend of divorced working mothers. But the '80s were a time of peace, prosperity and Reagan conservatism. The economy flourished and viewers began to dream of living the lifestyle of prime time soap opera families like the Ewings or Carringtons.

It looked as if Americans would never regain their taste for comedies. Until one man saved the format.

The Cosby Show was more than just a breath of fresh air—it was like someone opened the window on a breezy day and allowed all of the stench left from the old earthquake-damaging Lear-based comedies get blown away. Once *Cosby Show* became a hit, the networks tried other family comedies. The

dysfunctional '70s shows were replaced by modern homes that were grounded in the functional families of the '50s while retaining contemporary lingo. And comedy again began to rise to the top of the ratings.

By the second season of *Cosby Show*, five of the top ten series were sitcoms, and NBC had firmly planted its claim on Thursday night (*Cosby Show* along with hits *Cheers*, *Family Ties*, and *Night Court*). By *Cosby*'s fourth season, eight of the top ten shows on TV were comedies—proving that the once-dead sitcom corpse had been revived successfully.

Once the *Cosby*-style functional East Coast family with the strong but sensitive male lead was successfully copied (*Growing Pains*, *Who's the Boss?*), there appeared negative, dysfunctional Midwest families that were created by those who thought the too-perfect *Cosby Show* was not reflective of reality (*Roseanne*, *Married with Children*). These “everyman” comedies featured common people the audience could relate to. And other '80s comedies focused on “everywoman,” with *Golden Girls*, *Designing Women*, *Murphy Brown* and other female-empowerment shows multiplying in prime time for the first time. Network executives found there was room on the schedule for all styles— in 1989-1990 both *Cosby* and *Roseanne* tied at the top of the ratings list, with the *Golden Girls* close behind, showing that America was happy to have comedies that gave differing views of family life.

The most important thing was that Norman Lear's near-death impact on the genre was over and escapist comedy again reigned in prime time. The Lear style remained, with shows taped live in front of a studio audience with overlit sets, but creators no longer felt they had to copy the latest politically correct trend. There was more variety to the comedy format, from alien *ALF* to conservative kids on *Family Ties* to dumb jocks on *Coach*. The sitcom was very much alive, preparing to enter the last decade of the millennium as the most popular format on television.

FAMILY TIES

This cleverly-conceived family comedy stole a bit from 1950s TV, then added some radical '60s philosophy while reflecting the political landscape of the 1980s. The family at its core was functional—as functional as could be expected considering the parents were flower children and the teenage son was a Nixon fanatic. The humor played with the fact that the nation had shifted from the rebelliousness of the Vietnam War-protest years to the materialistic Reagan era.

As unrealistic as the premise may sound, Alex was based on the real-life conservative teenage stepson of a liberal newspaper editor who was a friend of producer Gary Goldberg. The boy ended up becoming a production assistant on the show!

Based in Columbus, Ohio, what worked in the show's favor was that the parents and children truly loved each other. Conservative Alex was not scorned by his liberal parents—they both accepted him and learned from him. If the show had a flaw it was that Alex was almost always shown as the wise one, taking the parental role from the ditzy mom and soft-hearted dad. Two years before *The Cosby Show* would portray the parents as firmly in control, *Family Ties* made the son look smarter than the parents (*Son*

Knows Best?) and soon other shows attempted to follow the formula. Was smart Alex intentionally named that way to prove that children are “smart alecks?”

Other ‘80s sitcoms had smart-aleck children leading dunder-headed parents, such as *Silver Spoons* and *Charles in Charge*. The copycats had none of the political bite and little of the heart that was shown in *Family Ties*. They also didn’t have a star-quality actor like Michael J. Fox, who made the show fun to watch and actually made it attractive for young adults to be conservatives.

ON: 1982-1989. Remembered as a Thursday stalwart, the show actually premiered on Wednesday night, then moved to Monday and back to Wednesday within a period of 16 months. In 1984, the show moved to Thursday night at 7:30 p.m. which is where it waited nine months for *The Cosby Show* to premiere before *Family Ties* became a hit.

RATINGS: NBC was the third-ranked network and had almost no hit shows when *Family Ties* first aired (*The A Team*, ranked 10th, was NBC’s only show in the top 20 and the network had no sitcoms in the top 30!). *Family Ties* was left on the schedule despite its weak ratings because there was nothing better to put on—it was a flop in its first two seasons but attracted younger demographics for the network. Once *The Cosby Show* was its lead-in, *Family Ties* jumped to 5th in the ratings during its third season and spent the following two years in second place in the Niensens. NBC then moved the show to Sunday nights, where it dropped to 17th place in 1987-1988 and began its decline in the ratings.

SEQUELS & SPIN-OFFS: None. Producer Gary David Goldberg refused to clone the show and announced when it ended that there would be no reunions. He produced Michael J. Fox’s ‘90s hit *Spin City*, in which some *Family Ties* cast members made guest appearances. Four of the five *Family Ties* stars appeared together on stage for NBC’s 75th anniversary special in 2002.

At the peak of the series’ popularity, the cast went to England in a 1985 TV-movie entitled *Family Ties Vacation*, which has now been edited as a four-part rerun.

HIGHLIGHTS: Though the series never won for Best Comedy after being nominated four years in a row, Michael J. Fox won three Emmy awards. Fox’s unsuccessful first Emmy nomination in 1985 it was in the category of Best Supporting Actor, though by the next year the third-billed Fox won in the category of Best Actor (nominated over the top-billed star of the show Michael Gross).

Fox was not the first person chosen to play the role—producers had wanted Matthew Broderick. And even after Fox was cast NBC executives tried to get him fired, saying he was the only thing wrong with the pilot. Goldberg insisted in keeping him and it launched Fox’s successful career.

IMPACT: 3 out of 10. The show’s biggest claim to fame was that it was the first sitcom to feature a politically conservative teenager in a sympathetic role. Just as Archie Bunker was the bad guy that audiences ended up loving, so Michael J. Fox’s self-centered Alex P. Keaton was intended to show everything that was wrong with the ‘80s “me” philosophy. Yet Alex became the central character on the show and viewers loved him. Soon other shows followed the formula with smart-aleck conservative children explaining the stock market to their airhead liberal parents.

OTHERS SAY: “Fox himself deserves much of the credit for turning *Family Ties*’ glib, conservative Alex P. Keaton into a charmingly sly yet surprisingly vulnerable character.” *The TV Guide TV Book* by Ed Weiner, HarperPerennial, 1992.

“Not everybody was happy with this abrupt change of focus. Reports surfaced in 1987 that a ‘bored’ Meredith Baxter Birney was ready to turn in her love beads as Elyse and it was only Michael J. Fox’s intervention that kept her on the show. (Perhaps it was part repayment for the kindness she’d shown him in the first year, when, since he was without wheels, she would pick him up every day on her way to work.)” *Favorite Families of TV* by Christopher and Michael Denis, Citadel Press, 1992.

“Beaver Cleaver’s world extended no further than his block, or perhaps his elementary school. But as the strange son in *Family Ties* suggests, today’s sitcom children are well-versed in a range of contemporary issues. Economics, politics, human relations, fashion and sexuality have taken the place of pranks and paper routes in the minds of the television adolescent.” Simi Horwitz, “TV’s Revolting Kids,” *Channels*, January/February 1984.

CHEERS

Cheers was another step in the evolution of the “workplace” sitcom, fashioned after the style of *Taxi*, *Mary Tyler Moore* and *The Dick Van Dyke Show*. Only this time viewers saw a workplace where the customers were as important to the plot as were those who worked there. It was inspired by the real Boston bar named the Bull and Fitch, though even today tourists are disappointed to discover that the real bar looks nothing like the TV set.

Cheers reflected what was happening in the American workplace. Adult workers were unhappy in their jobs, no longer had strong nuclear families to go home to, and needed to share their problems with a bartender who would listen but would never get involved. It was a plot device that many could relate to and enjoyed laughing at. Viewers found comfort in this non-related “family” where everyone knew your name but little commitment was required. Life outside the bar was rarely seen and this series typified the new trend where blood relatives were rarely seen in workplace comedies.

Enough people tuned in to make it one of the top comedies of its time, proving that it struck a nerve with lonely viewers. In retrospect it makes sense that the one character who had the longest run in prime time television comedy would be psychiatrist Frasier Crane, because the regulars at the bar really needed his professional help. And this series may have been a type of therapy for many Americans who needed the same.

ON: 1982-1993. With 271 episodes, it is the longest-running live-on-tape sitcom in history. The show always aired on Thursday night.

RATINGS: The series was a bomb in its first two years on the low-rated NBC network. In its first season it ranked #74 out of 98 shows in prime time and should have been cancelled. But the series was nominated for 13 Emmys and won the award for Best Comedy, then followed up with another in its

second year. Like *Hill Street Blues* (that aired an hour later on Thursday nights) the show was kept on the air to add prestige to the NBC lineup.

After *The Cosby Show* premiered on a Thursday night in 1984, audiences kept the dial tuned to the network the rest of the night and *Cheers* began its rise in the ratings. It ranked 12th in 1985, 5th in 1986, 3rd in 1987, before reaching the number one spot in 1990-1991. It was a top ten show in all of its last eight seasons.

SEQUELS & SPIN-OFFS: The first spin-off was not successful, a series called *The Tortelli's* that was based on waitress Carla's family. But after *Cheers* ended, supporting player Frasier Crane moved to Seattle for his own series that was an equally big success. Most of the *Cheers* cast members (even Shelly Long) recreated their roles as guest stars on *Frasier*.

HIGHLIGHTS: It won Best Comedy three times, along with awards for Ted Danson, Kirstie Alley, Rhea Perlman, and Woody Harrelson. Once thought to be the sure winner of the all-time Emmy race, in the last season the series fell just short of beating *The Mary Tyler Moore Show's* record of the most Emmys won by a situation comedy up to that time. Then in 2002 *Frasier* topped both.

Shelly Long left the series at what she thought was the show's peak in 1987. She wrongly assumed that it was the Sam vs. Diane dynamic that kept the series alive. Not only did the ratings go up when she left, but replacement Kirstie Alley won an Emmy Award (see Chapter 8 for more on Long).

IMPACT: 6 out of 10. The show took the best from the oddball workplace sitcoms of the '70s, like *Taxi* and *Barney Miller*, and added a bar setting where the quasi-family could meet each night. The series proved that regular characters did not need to have a home life in order to make a show successful.

OTHERS SAY: "*Cheers*, in the opinion of the *L.A. Times*, was 'the finest comedy on TV...a perfect blend of cast and material in a half-hour destined to be recalled as one of TV's best ever.' At the (1983 Emmy) awards ceremony, *Cheers* scored a grand slam plus one when it claimed five trophies" (in its first year on the air). *The Emmys* by Thomas O'Neil, Penguin Books, 1992.

"The formula for the success of *Cheers* was like that of a potent cocktail that bartender Sam Malone might serve up: one part comedy, one part romance, one part soap opera, add a generous handful of familiar yet somewhat quirky characters, and blend well. Stir in abundant laughter and sip slowly until feeling warm and fuzzy." *Prime Time Hits* by Susan Sackett, Billboard Books, 1993.

"*Cheers* had an uncanny knack for bringing in new characters that were even more interesting than the ones they replaced." *Jump the Shark* by John Hein, E P Dutton, 2002.

"The cast of characters was enough for any three series. And at the heart of it was the fiercest, funniest flirtation TV had ever witnessed, a pair of attracted opposites so perfect together that their names became synonymous with the keep-'em-separated school of comedy: Sam and Diane." *TV Guide*, naming *Cheers* 18th on the list of "Greatest Shows of All Time," May 4, 2002.

WEBSTER – (1983-1987) ABC's version of *Diff'rent Strokes*, where an undersized adorable African American boy is adopted into a rich white home, this time led by a former pro football player and

his successful working wife. The Friday night series was a favorite with kids but did not garner great ratings, peaking at number 25 in its second season. *The TV Guide TV Book* claims that 40-inch tall star Emmanuel Lewis ended up being considered a deity in Japan because his doll looked like one the Japanese consider a symbol of good fortune. Lewis's career was resurrected on WB's *The Surreal Life* in 2003 and as a celebrity boxer in the movie *Dickie Roberts, Former Child Star*.

KATE & ALLIE -- (1984-1989) From the producer of *That Girl* came this show that could be called "Those Girls"—it took two divorced single women in New York City, gave them kids, and had them all move in together. They were like Lucy and Ethel without the husbands or LaVerne and Shirley with children. The idea came from the show's female co-creator who found herself surrounded by divorced women at her class reunion. Sherry Coben said, "Our show is really a personality comedy—*Mary Tyler Moore* style. The Mary and Rhoda friendship was only a little thing between other scenes, but that's the part I adored—I'd never seen it before. It's like most of the female friendships I've had, where we just talk on the phone or over lunch. And it's probably the strength of our show."

It's hard to believe that this uninspired comedy became an instant hit when it premiered in March of 1984, placing eighth in that year's ratings. The unmemorable and unremarkable show was also nominated for Best Comedy at the Emmys in 1984, 85 & 86! Even more difficult to believe is that it was the only top ten sitcom during the 1983-1984 season, leading critics to proclaim the genre dead. After *Cosby Show* rescued the format, *Kate & Allie* lost some of its appeal but spent the next three seasons ranked in the teens. In reruns the series is dated but shows the beginning of the '80s feminist sitcom trend. *Kate & Allie's* self-sufficiency and lack of male regulars would later lead to other women empowerment series like *Golden Girls* and *Designing Women*.

Susan Sackett wrote, "*Kate & Allie* was different because it was realistic.... It was the perfect show for the times. The divorce rate was at its highest ever, with one out of two marriages splitting up."

The authors of *Favorite Families of TV* said the show's "formula worked, proving that two single mothers could be nurturing and, at the same time, witty, sophisticated, catty, man-hungry, tipsy—in short, most of the things mothers aren't allowed to be on network television."

Excerpts from CHAPTER EIGHT

TV'S WORST SITCOMS

Influence is not always positive. A book discussing TV's most influential television comedy series would not be complete without the sitcoms that had a negative impact as well. What follows is a list of the ten worst situation comedies of all time. Some have never been seen since they first aired in prime time while others are so bad that they occasionally get rerun as a joke on TV Land or as "brilliant but

cancelled” on cable network Trio. But most have one thing in common—they come from people who had done other great things on television.

THE WORST SITCOMS OF ALL TIME

1. MY MOTHER THE CAR –(1965-1966) Jerry Van Dyke turned down the role as Gilligan on *Gilligan’s Island* to play a man who talks to his rein“car”nated mother. Jerry had been a successful guest star on his brother Dick Van Dyke’s hit CBS series, which was in its final season when *My Mother* premiered. The 1928 Porter’s voice, done by ‘50s sitcom star Ann Sothern, spoke only to her son and only through the car radio. The dramatic tension in the show came from an evil auto collector who wanted to steal the collectible car. Dr. Charles Ansell, president of the L.A. Society of Clinical Psychologists, said the series was a modern retelling of Oedipus Rex. “Jerry Van Dyke acts out every man’s basic dream to conquer the mother and have her for himself.”

TV Guide’s 2002 rankings of the “50 Worst Shows of All Time” named it the worst sitcom in history (calling it “absurd, inane”) and the #2 worst show of all time (second only to *The Jerry Springer Show!*). “This one is a classic favorite sitcom flop,” writes Rick Mitz in *The Great TV Sitcom Book*. Is it really that bad? Well—it’s not as much bad as it is dumb.

Most amazing is that the series came from the creative minds of two men who went on to produce two of the greatest sitcoms in history—*Mary Tyler Moore Show* and *Barney Miller*. Maybe they just needed to get one failure out of their system...or, as *TV Guide* put it, “They just need the right vehicle.”

2. THE FLYING NUN – (1967-1970) Future Academy Award winner Sally Field went from *Gidget* to playing Sister Bertrille, a bubbly nun whose light weight and starched coronet (a wide-brimmed nun’s hat) allowed her to fly in the Puerto Rican breeze.

The show played off the popularity of *I Dream of Jeannie* and was produced by the man who made *Bewitched* a hit. It also took advantage of audience interest in recent hit films about nuns like *The Sound of Music*, *The Singing Nun* and *The Trouble With Angels*. Since Vatican II had just modernized the church, Catholic officials welcomed the well-scrubbed star as a way to make the Church more attractive.

3. LIFE WITH LUCY – (1986) The only TV series Lucille Ball starred in that was not a hit was also her last. Lucy’s slapstick was funny when she was in her 40s but it was cringe inducing when she was 75! The same *I Love Lucy* writers were used to create scripts that felt thirty years old and her 80-year-old *Here’s Lucy* co-star Gale Gordon came back as well for this fiasco. But the grandma-moving-in-with-her-grandchildren story lines took a back seat to Lucy hanging from ladders and swimming in soapsuds.

4. THE SECRET DIARY OF DESMOND PFEIFFER – (1998) This UPN “adult” comedy about Abraham Lincoln’s butler lasted on the air only three weeks. Pfeiffer (pronounced with the “p”) was an intelligent, large, black servant to the foolish President during the Civil War. The humor was derived from copying the Bill Clinton White House scandals, but seeing Lincoln seduce his “intern” behind the back of his power-hungry wife seemed not only humorless but downright tacky and almost sacrilegious.

5. HELLO LARRY – (1979-1980) McLean Stevenson left *M*A*S*H* to star in a string of seven—count them—seven series bombs. This was his most infamous. A 1979 spin-off of *Diff’rent*

Strokes (which aired in the time slot right before it), Larry was a divorced Portland radio talk show host with custody of a couple of wild teenage daughters. This *One Day at a Time* copy included an elderly grandpa, Harlem Globetrotter Meadowlark Lemon, and even former *Donna Reed* co-star Shelly Fabares (who also became a semi-regular on *One Day*). It's hard to believe NBC renewed it for a second season when critics had already labeled it one of the lamest shows ever.

6. ME & THE CHIMP— (1972) From great producers come great flops. In this case, Garry Marshall had produced the Emmy-nominated *Odd Couple* (and would later do *Happy Days*, *Laverne and Shirley*, and *Mork and Mindy*). Using his successful formula of two strong lead characters, he went to CBS in 1972 with the idea of *That Girl* star Ted Bessell paired with Buttons the chimpanzee.

Originally titled *The Chimp and I*, Bessell wouldn't take second billing to a monkey so the show was renamed. Bessell retired from acting after this humiliating experience. "This has got to be the giant mistake in my life," Bessell said. However, he did go on to win an Emmy award for producing *The Tracey Ullman Show*. Harry Castleman said *Me & the Chimp* was "a low-water mark in western civilization."

7. SHIRLEY S WORLD – (1971-1972) Movie star Shirley MacLaine brought her jet-setting lifestyle to television as a globetrotting photographer for a newsmagazine. ABC paid big bucks for the star's talents and had the series shot on location in Tokyo, England and other foreign locations. Other than her boss there were no regular cast members and the audience didn't find MacLaine's bizarre antics funny enough to make it worth watching. It was off the air in four months. She went back to films and won an Academy Award for *Terms of Endearment*.

8. BRAM AND ALICE – (2002) CBS embarrassed itself with this adult comedy from the producers of *Frasier*. Bram was a single middle-aged drunken lothario who was not aware that he fathered a child during one of his conquests. The first episode showed Alice arriving at Bram's doorstep, Bram attempting to seduce the 20-year-old, and the audience roaring with laughter when Bram discovered that the woman he was trying to bed was actually his daughter. The incest humor was television at its worst and critics ripped the network for even allowing the series to air. In the annual poll of TV critics by *Electronic Media* magazine, the show was named the worst on network TV in 2002. It was off the air after six weeks. It's hard to believe that production company had the guts to take out trade magazine ads in 2003 that said, "Paramount proudly presents for your Emmy consideration, *Bram and Alice*."

9. IT S ABOUT TIME – (1966-1967) Successful producer Sherwood Schwartz copied the castaway theme from his recent hit *Gilligan's Island* and set it in the stone age (with a *Gilligan*-like opening musical story line to explain it all). Two astronauts, one a bumbler like Gilligan and one a take-charge boss like Skipper, went back in time and landed in the dinosaur age. Oddball cavemen made up the rest of the cast (including old TV stars Imogene Coca and *Car 54's* Joe E. Ross).

When the CBS show flopped and was about to be cancelled half way through the season, Schwartz had the astronauts go forward in time and bring the Neanderthal family to present-day America. Cavemen walking the streets of modern New York didn't work, either. Today it's fun to watch old tapes of the show just to see such an odd concept, and a number of recent popular feature films have attempted to tell a

similar story. “The premise was just too narrow for the development of story lines,” wrote David Marc & Robert Thompson.

10. HERBIE, THE LOVE BUG – (1982) About 15 years after TV’s fantasy craze subsided, Disney attempted to adapt its popular *Love Bug* feature films to the small screen, bringing original star Dean Jones from the original 1969 film. The story of the intelligent Volkswagen Beetle that communicates (by actions, not words) with its owner seemed amazingly reminiscent of the number one show on this list. The hour-long production aired on CBS for only four weeks. Obviously no one learned from *My Mother the Car* than people don’t want to get their comedy punch lines from a smart automobile! Four months after *Herbie* left the air, adventure series *Knight Rider* premiered to huge ratings and proved that viewers that rejected humorous cars would accept a serious talking car that helped solve crime!