

## **I LOVE LUCY**

1951–57, CBS. Creators: Desi Arnaz, Jess Oppenheimer, Madelyn Pugh, Bob Carroll Jr. Stars: Lucille Ball, Desi Arnaz, Vivian Vance, William Frawley.

*I Love Lucy* accomplished as much behind the camera as it did in front of the camera, which, if you've ever seen an episode of *I Love Lucy* (and who hasn't?), is an amazing statement. Desilu, the studio created in the 1950s to produce it, was TV's most influential independent production company until MTM Enterprises came around in the 1970s. The Desilu system of photographing sitcoms—filming the action with multiple cameras, result-

ing in a crisp, clear, final image and program that was easy to duplicate without any loss of visual clarity—not only changed the TV industry’s way of doing things but had a lot to do with changing the epicenter of U.S. TV production from New York to Los Angeles and popularizing the concept of syndicated reruns. At a time when most minorities on TV were confined to ethnic comedies of their own or not visible at all, *I Love Lucy* proudly featured a marriage between the all-American redhead Lucille Ball and the heavily accented Latino bandleader Desi Arnaz, a singer and conga player from Cuba. And, though this final point may be absurdly obvious, the *I Love Lucy* shows produced by Desilu were as funny as they were popular, and for most of the time they were on the air, no TV series was more popular.



*I Love Lucy*, starring Lucille Ball and her husband, Desi Arnaz, as Lucy and Ricky Ricardo, was one of the most important and influential sitcoms in TV history, as well as one of the funniest.

The couple's, and the show's, unlikely success made for a true television sitcom original, yet many of the secret ingredients of *I Love Lucy* came from elsewhere—specifically, from radio, TV quiz shows, and movies. Lucille Ball had starred in a CBS Radio situation comedy called *My Favorite Husband*, which lasted from 1948 to 1951. She played Liz Cooper, and Richard Denning played her loving husband, George, but then Ball, now a radio star after a middling career in film, was asked by CBS to take her domestic sitcom act from radio to TV. She said yes, on the nonnegotiable condition that her husband on the TV show be played by Arnaz, who had been her real-life husband since 1940. CBS reluctantly agreed, and Ball and Arnaz brought along the major brain trust behind *My Favorite Husband*: the producer Jess Oppenheimer and the writers Bob Carroll Jr. and Madelyn Pugh, to create and write *I Love Lucy*. (Many of the first season's scripts, in fact, were reworked versions of plots from the old radio show.) Arnaz and Ball combined parts of their first names and came up with Desilu, the name of the production company they formed to produce *I Love Lucy*. He ran the company, and she was the star of its flagship show—the same arrangement Grant Tinker and Mary Tyler Moore had when they launched MTM Productions two decades later.

Before *I Love Lucy* even got into production, serious disagreements arose—not between Lucy and Desi, but between the showbiz power couple and the network and sponsor. The arguments were technical and logistical: At the time, the visual quality of what viewers saw on their TV sets depended on where they lived. If they resided on the East Coast, and were watching network shows emanating from New York, the images broadcast would be relatively crisp and clear. Other cities, especially in the West, would have to settle for the delayed delivery system of a kinescope—a film camera pointed directly at a TV monitor, resulting in a washed-out, barely watchable TV picture. CBS and the cigarette company sponsor, Philip Morris, wanted *I Love Lucy* to originate from New York, so the image received in East Coast TV homes would be a typically strong broadcast signal for those viewers, rather than a bleached, blurry kinescope image if the show were performed live in Hollywood and relayed back east. Lucy and Desi, as new parents with a comfortable home, wanted to stay in California and work from there, while Desi had the additional motivation of wanting his friends and relatives back in Cuba to see what he was about to do on American TV. (Shipping film prints of his series would be much easier, and more impres-

sive, than cumbersome kinescopes.) Arnaz wanted to film *I Love Lucy*, yet he also wanted the energy and support of a live audience: His wife had blossomed on her radio show, playing someone else's wife, because she played so well to the laughter from the studio audience there. How to pull it off? By borrowing from the TV quiz show *Truth or Consequences*, which had come up with a method of using multiple cameras simultaneously to film the action before a live audience, and also by seeking out the master cinematographer Karl Freund, who had filmed part of the silent German classic *Metropolis* and photographed Greta Garbo in *Camille*, to figure out how to light a stage comedy so that the actors would be properly illuminated from a variety of angles. Why did Arnaz and Ball ask Freund? Because he was the cinematographer responsible for making Lucille Ball look so luminous in the 1943 film comedy *Du Barry Was a Lady*.

Eventually, a system was devised that Desilu thought would work, but neither CBS nor the sponsor wanted to pay the extra cost to finance a four-camera, 35-millimeter filming and editing process. (After the premiere episode, the number of cameras was reduced to three.) The difference, in total, was minimal, but CBS and Philip Morris both refused. Arnaz proposed a cunning counteroffer that ranks as one of the best deals ever made in Hollywood history. He would agree to reduce the salary he and his wife were owed weekly, from five thousand dollars to four thousand—a pay cut of 20 percent—if the multi-cam system was paid for. It was, split evenly between the network and the sponsor. That wasn't the brilliant business deal, though. This was: Desilu had been given 50 percent ownership of the finished *I Love Lucy* masters, and Desi Arnaz said that in exchange for their voluntary pay cut he and his wife would have to get 100 percent ownership from CBS. They did, and those crisp-looking *I Love Lucy* programs basically launched the TV rerun business (kinescopes, with their inferior quality, were seen as acceptable solutions before television networks were connected coast-to-coast in the early 1950s but never thought of as programming good enough to rebroadcast) and made a fortune for Desilu. It was a fortune spent immediately on land for studio space and for the production of additional TV series.

Using the *I Love Lucy* camera and tech crew on its down days, Desilu quickly doubled its output by producing *Our Miss Brooks*, starring Eve Arden as a schoolteacher, in 1952. Other series followed, and in another move MTM Productions would copy, the Desilu studio founded on com-