

edy branched out into drama. For Desilu, the list was as impressive as it was unlikely and included both ABC's period crime drama *The Untouchables* and NBC's futuristic space-travel drama *Star Trek*. And in comedy, the three-camera system pioneered by Desilu became the industry standard, used by such iconic situation comedies as *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, *Happy Days*, and the MTM Productions flagship, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*. Enough about the technology. Now about the comedy.

Lucille Ball's gifts, for both physical comedy and line delivery, were superb. Over its dominant run, *I Love Lucy* won five Emmy Awards, including two for Best Situation Comedy and one for Lucille Ball as Best Actress in a Continuing Performance. What's even more impressive about the show's universally loved set pieces and classic episodes is that they are spread so evenly throughout the show's six-season run, attesting to the overall comic consistency of *I Love Lucy*. My all-time favorite episode, "Lucy Does a TV Commercial" (in which she gets drunk on Vitameatavegamin), appeared in 1952, as did the equally classic "Job Switching" (in which Lucy and her best friend, Ethel Mertz, played by Vivian Vance, try to keep up with an ever-speedier conveyor belt at a candy factory). In 1953, *I Love Lucy* gave us "Lucy Goes to the Hospital" (in which she brought home Little Ricky), and 1955 gave us "Harpo Marx," featuring Harpo and his identically dressed hostess re-creating the mirror scene from *Duck Soup*. Finally, in 1956, Lucy stomped grapes in "Lucy's Italian Movie," eliciting a bunch of laughs in yet another timeless comedy triumph. The show was equally consistent, and triumphant, in the ratings: Its first year, *I Love Lucy* was No. 3 for the 1951-52 season, then topped the chart for the next three years. In 1955-56, the quiz-show phenomenon *The \$64,000 Question* bumped *I Love Lucy* down to No. 2 for the season, but the next year, for the comedy's final season, *I Love Lucy* was back on top, and that's how it went out.

Another type of domestic situation comedy, in which the primary focus was parents raising children, also came from radio, and one of the most famous and long-lasting ones was a family sitcom that had started on CBS Radio in 1944 and shifted to NBC and ABC Radio before being adapted for television by ABC in 1952. That show was *The Adventures of Ozzie & Harriet*, starring the bandleader Ozzie Nelson and his wife, the singer Harriet Nelson, as themselves, raising their growing and good-looking sons, Ricky and David,

who also played themselves on TV. *Ozzie & Harriet* lasted for fourteen seasons on TV (among live-action sitcoms, only *The Jack Benny Program* had a longer reign, at fifteen seasons) and was a pioneer in showing the power of scripted shows to boost tie-in music sales. A decade before NBC launched *The Monkees*, Ozzie Nelson put his younger son into the spotlight in a 1957 *Ozzie & Harriet* episode called “Ricky the Drummer,” in which the teen TV star Ricky Nelson gets onstage to sing “I’m Walkin’,” a song that had reached the Top 10 for Fats Domino earlier that year. After Ricky Nelson sang it on TV, his version, too, hit the Top 10 and launched the next-generation Nelson as a genuine pop star.

The biggest legacy of *Ozzie & Harriet*, though, was its early coalescence of what the family sitcom of the 1950s came to include and represent. Dad was the head of the household, going off to work somewhere, doing something, but always returning home in time for family meals and to deal with problems at home. Mom was there, always, and usually with an apron and a pearl necklace, handing out bagged lunches for school. And there were kids, going to school, getting into minor trouble, but always returning to the reassuring protection of their loving family. Most shows were set in the suburbs, at a time when the suburbs themselves were a new and shiny possibility. Also new and shiny possibilities were the state-of-the-art appliances featured so often on the shows, especially around mealtime: these were things, like new refrigerators and ovens, that the sponsors wanted TV viewers to covet. In retrospect, we tend to look at these vintage sitcoms as the way things were, but really they depicted the way many people wished things could be.

In the wake of *Ozzie & Harriet*, there was a sudden explosion of domestic sitcoms, and for every working-class, struggling TV family like the one in *The Life of Riley* there were many more tight-knit, middle-class TV clans who were more like the Nelsons: stable nuclear families in an unstable nuclear age. Danny Thomas—who, like Desi Arnaz and Ozzie Nelson, played a musical entertainer as well as a family patriarch—starred in ABC’s *Make Room for Daddy* in 1953, which was soon rechristened *The Danny Thomas Show*. Then came a string of family sitcoms that, collectively, all but defined the genre in the 1950s: CBS’s *Father Knows Best* in 1954, CBS’s *Leave It to Beaver* in 1957, and ABC’s *Donna Reed Show* in 1958.

*Father Knows Best* starred Robert Young, reprising his role of family man and midwestern insurance salesman Jim Anderson from his 1949–53 NBC

Radio show but as more of a domestic authority figure, because the title of radio's *Father Knows Best* ended, tellingly, with a question mark. *Leave It to Beaver* starred Hugh Beaumont and Barbara Billingsley as Ward and June Cleaver, with Jerry Mathers and Tony Dow as their young sons, Theodore (a.k.a. the Beaver, because of his buckteeth) and Wally, and Ken Osmond as Wally's unctuous neighborhood friend, Eddie Haskell. *Beaver* was more seditious, and less sanitized, because of what it showed behind closed doors in its suburban setting: the boys would misbehave, and the parents, in private, would express wonder and concern about both their parenting methods and the behavior of their children. And *The Donna Reed Show*, arguably the squeakiest of them all, featured Carl Betz as the pediatrician Alex Stone and Donna Reed, the program's titular star, as his patient and grounded wife, Donna. Problems were easily and lovingly solved, Donna Stone was an impeccable cook and housekeeper, and the series, like *The Adventures of Ozzie & Harriet*, managed to turn its teen actors into hit singers on the pop charts. And not just one TV teen, either, but two: in the 1960s, Paul Petersen, who played the family's son, Jeff, scored a Top 10 hit with the respectful "My Dad," while Shelley Fabares, who played Jeff's sister Mary, shot to the very top of the charts in 1962, weeks after singing "Johnny Angel" on *The Donna Reed Show*.

There were single-parent families around this time in TV sitcom history, but not many, and at first those parents were exclusively male. (It would be another decade before such single-women parents as depicted in *Julia* and *One Day at a Time* would appear.) John Forsythe starred in *Bachelor Father*, which premiered on CBS in 1957, as a well-to-do Hollywood attorney caring for his niece after her parents were killed in a car crash. Fred MacMurray presided over ABC's *My Three Sons* in 1960, playing a widower raising his boys as best he could. And in a hugely successful work-and-home hybrid sitcom spun off from an episode of *The Danny Thomas Show*, Andy Griffith played the small-town sheriff, and widower, Andy Taylor on CBS's *Andy Griffith Show*, keeping the peace in Mayberry while trying to do the same at home, raising his young son, Opie, played by the talented Ron Howard. Tellingly, because there were no female spouses around to cook and clean in these 1950s sitcoms, all these bachelor fathers had help at home: an "Oriental houseboy" (as he was then introduced) on *Bachelor Father*, an elderly housekeeping "uncle" on *My Three Sons*, and the blue-ribbon-baking Aunt Bee on *The Andy Griffith Show*.

Another hybrid sitcom—half workplace, half home life—premiered in 1961 and was one of the smartest, most influential sitcoms of the 1960s: CBS's *Dick Van Dyke Show*, created by Carl Reiner in 1961, starring Dick Van Dyke and Mary Tyler Moore as the TV-variety-show writer Rob Petrie and his suburban wife, Laura. It was one of the few modern, intelligent comedies of the 1960s—a decade that presented increasingly silly, fantasy-based situation comedies at a time when, in real life, everything from politics and war to music and film was getting increasingly relevant and revolutionary. “High concept” comedies became very popular, so much so that CBS's *Beverly Hillbillies* topped the TV ratings the season it premiered in 1962–63, the first sitcom to do so since *I Love Lucy*. *The Beverly Hillbillies* stayed there the next year as well, spawning a small raft of official and unofficial rural sitcom spin-offs. Fantasy was so big that two competing 1964 shows featuring families who happened to be “monsters,” ABC's *Addams Family* and CBS's *Munsters*, could coexist comfortably. ABC's *Brady Bunch*, in 1969, injected the tiniest hint of topicality into the family sitcom by having the Bradys be a blended family, with a “bunch” of children from their previous marriages. But topicality, on entertainment TV in that era, wouldn't really arrive until 1970, when CBS purged itself of its older-skewing rural comedies and sought controversy by scheduling a family sitcom so different, so daring, it came with a warning label attached.