

PART I

**No-Talent Host Tames the
One-Eyed Beast**

Out of the Paley-ozoic Ooze

The Columbia Broadcasting System is preparing—for presentation over its television network—a full-hour Sunday revue series and tentatively has scheduled the first performance for June 20 from 9 to 10 p.m. The show has been given the title of “You’re the Top,” and Ed Sullivan has been signed to be master of ceremonies and producer. According to the network, it will adhere to a format which avoids a vaudeville or variety-type routine.

New York Times, May 22, 1948

When Ed Sullivan welcomed America to watch the premiere of a new CBS television show called “Toast of the Town,” at 9 P.M. on Sunday, June 20, 1948, World War II had been over for only three years, the boys were back, babies were booming, and everything was bountiful—bubblegum, nylon stockings, gasoline, jugglers, acrobats.

In the spring of 1948, the country was in a contented, conservative mood following the turmoil of a world war, even if the memory of Hiroshima had been replaced by a silent mushroom cloud that hovered over the globe and instilled a chilly new interior turmoil—a “cold war.” Outwardly, peace and prosperity had descended on America and created the appearance of a population eager to forget the past and have a good time. As John Updike said in an interview with Jeffrey A. Trachtenberg of the *Wall Street Journal* in 2005, “The U.S. in the wake of World War II was a naïve, innocent country looking to be led.”

Radio had united, and helped cheer up, the nation during the war and, by the late 1940s, was in its middle-age prime, but several of its major programs had overstayed their welcome. A new broadcasting menace, the “giveaway show,” knocked off the air such beloved veterans as Fred Allen and Edgar Bergen. CBS president William Paley, desperate to rejuvenate his radio network, went on the march in what were called

“the Paley raids,” enticing Jack Benny, George Burns & Gracie Allen, Amos ’n’ Andy (Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll), and other loyal longtime NBC radio stars to defect to CBS. For Paley, it was insurance against the slim chance that television might succeed. Movies were still popular, though their huge wartime attendance dipped after 1945, when moviegoing became less a diversion from wartime angst. To help pull people into movies in their new streamlined Oldsmobiles and Studebakers, the drive-in theater was invented; older movie houses played to small audiences.

It was time for some serious nest building and cocooning. Finally, everyone was home together again, and TV was there to welcome them. The first hit show that kept people at home was “Texaco Star Theater,” whose star was a used-up radio comic and battered ex-slapstick vaudevillian named Milton Berle. Berle debuted on TV only 12 days before Sullivan’s TV debut and shortly after the emergence of TV’s other early major megastar, Arthur Godfrey, a radio-bred personality as relaxed as the brassy Berle was in-your-face. Neither a brash Berle nor a folksy Godfrey, Ed Sullivan somehow managed to squeeze himself into a niche between these two reigning TV giants of 1948.

Berle, though he didn’t know it yet, was about to become old news. As fresh as he was on TV in 1948, he wore out his comic welcome in a few years, whereas Godfrey, with his homespun, guy-next-door style, was the wave of TV’s future. Together, Berle and Godfrey ruled those primitive video airwaves. Godfrey had an all-time high of *four* CBS shows on the air at once: one telecast every morning (“Arthur Godfrey and His Friends”) and one seen weekly (“Arthur Godfrey’s Talent Scouts”), and both programs were also simulcast on radio. Godfrey wore a radio headset on screen, as if treating TV as a branch of radio; he could wing an entire show, often arriving at the studio five minutes before airtime. An unidentified Milwaukee broadcaster said, “The only thing a person could turn on in his house without getting Godfrey was the faucet.”

Viewers doted upon the ubiquitous Godfrey, who managed to be simultaneously wry, folksy, and mildly risqué. He was surrounded by his circle of “friends”—a chummy, worshipful showbiz family that included the basso profundo announcer Tony Marvin (“That’s right, Ah-thuh”), singers Frank Parker, Marian Marlow, and Jeanette Davis, plus a rainbow coalition: a cheery Hawaiian named Haleloke; a black quartet, the Mariners; a trio of wholesome girl singers, the McGuire Sisters; and a spunky Irish lass, Carmel Quinn.

Others would come and go, most visibly Julius La Rosa, a cuddly, twinkly-eyed baritone just out of the navy and one of the proudest discoveries of former navy radioman Godfrey. La Rosa left the show more spectacularly than anyone ever had or ever would, after Godfrey fired him on the air, much to La Rosa's and listeners' utter shock, a page-one news story that made both of them famous beyond their talents. It was the start of Godfrey's own swoon, revealing the petty, vengeful, tyrannical reality behind his chatty, chuckly fatherly facade and mellow, clogged-up voice that someone described as "butterscotch."

Milton Berle may have been dubbed "Mr. Tuesday Night," but Godfrey was all over the place every weekday. With his four broadcasts, Godfrey all by himself was responsible for 17 percent of CBS's total advertising revenue. But Berle had the lead in one crucial respect: in the words of historian Bruce Dumont, in the PBS documentary "Pioneers of Primetime," "Berle was 'must-buy' TV. He sold television sets." And on Tuesday night he had a phenomenal 95 percent share of the audience, unequalled even by Super Bowl broadcasts. A TV set was now a necessity, not a luxury. Just as "Amos 'n' Andy" had transformed radio into an essential aspect of life and a viable commercial commodity in the 1930s, Berle sold TV sets in the late 1940s and 1950s. He helped make TV indispensable, as did two other TV curiosities—Roller Derby and "professional" wrestling, two "sports" created totally for television.

TV reception was terrible—as radio had been in the 1920s—but it was the novelty of *any* reception at all that thrilled people. That little round seven-inch screen with the greenish glow came from another planet, another time. Reception was actually determined by where people sat around the set. If you moved two inches, the picture could flop over, go into a diagonal zigzag dance, or, worse, turn into "snow." To bring an image back into focus, everyone frantically waved their arms like semaphore operators.

But TV or no TV, radio still controlled the airwaves in 1948. The nation's ears were stuck, almost genetically programmed, to "The Jack Benny Program," "The Pepsodent Show" with Bob Hope, Walter Winchell's "Jergens Journal," "Fibber McGee & Molly," "My Friend Irma," "Duffy's Tavern," "Arthur Godfrey's Talent Scouts," and "The Phil Harris–Alice Faye Show"—not to mention radio's most addictive soap operas: "When a Girl Marries," "Backstage Wife," "Stella Dallas," "Portia Faces Life," "Young Widow Brown," "Pepper Young's Family," and "The Romance of Helen Trent." In 1948, when CBS's William Paley lured away two of NBC's most entrenched radio shows, "Amos 'n'

Andy” and Jack Benny, Benny’s defection created an entertainment revolution that continues today—artists, not networks, suddenly could control their futures.

Still, only a few favored radio shows made the leap to early TV—“The Goldbergs,” “The Original Amateur Hour,” “Our Miss Brooks,” and “Ozzie and Harriet.” Many invincible radio stars, leery of TV and hedging their bets, tiptoed timidly into camera range. Jack Benny began with two shows in 1950. He did four in 1951. Not until 1960 did he commit himself to a bimonthly TV show. The walls of entertainment’s Jericho began to crumble. Huge stars were devoured—Fred Allen, Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy, Henry Morgan, Ed Gardner (of “Duffy’s Tavern”), and Marian and Jim Jordan (“Fibber McGee & Molly”). Radio was malleable and manageable, a known commodity; television was a vast, scary unknown. Radio was one-dimensional—sound—whereas mixing sound and sight created a jungle of not just wires but also creative and logistical problems. Nobody really understood it except the engineers (just barely). It was like shifting in the 1980s from typewriters to computers.

Fred Allen, who detested TV and failed miserably at it, said, “Television is much too blunt. Radio is more subtle and lets each listener enjoy it on his own intellectual level.” Allen’s brand of topical satire would not be welcomed on TV until the 1970s, with the troubled “Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour” and with “Saturday Night Live,” which aired safely at midnight. Radio shows, especially comedies, had familiar aesthetic boundaries that needed to be redrawn in visual terms. Jokes for the ear had to be spelled out for the camera, which often squelched them in the process: when Jack Benny descended into his vault on radio, you heard echoing footsteps that drew instant laughs; somehow it just wasn’t as funny to *watch* him actually walk down those same steps.

Radio formats contained the DNA of TV, but radio stardom was hardly a guarantee of TV success; often it was a warning. TV was a no-man’s-land, the shark-infested Bermuda Triangle of traditional entertainment. Television was not just radio with pictures, despite all of Fred Allen’s zingers (“TV is called a medium because so little of it is well done”). Great or gruesome, it was a fresh, unexplored form all its own.

Most radio people disdained the new medium and figured (even prayed) it was a fad—much as vaudeville and the movie industry had fretted about radio 30 years before. For one thing, it was live at a time when radio had gone to transcriptions, a safety net. Richard Kiley, who began acting in live TV dramas, recalled, “If you screwed up, Charley, it was

curtains.” Dead bodies were caught ducking off camera, sets collapsed, and phones failed to ring, doors to open, and guns to go off—all of radio’s early horrors were now fully visible, like moments out of the backstage farce “Noises Off.”

The exciting new visual medium with infinite potential was all ready to go, but—apart from Berle, Sid Caesar, and a few shadow Berles (Jerry Lester, Jack Carter, Morey Amsterdam, Henny Youngman)—there were no stars, no vivid TV personalities. The networks were forced to scrounge up hosts and headliners wherever they could, unearthing television performers under the most unlikely rocks.

TV, again like old radio and, before that, movies, was making itself up every night, and anybody with enough moxie (Berle), or a good enough gimmick (pretty-boy blond wrestler Gorgeous George), or just an ample bosom (Dagmar) could catch the camera’s eye and that of desperate network programming bosses, who had no idea what made good TV. As the movie and early TV director John Frankenheimer put it, “There wasn’t any history. We *were* the old days.” In a sketch on Jack Benny’s 1954 TV show, Fred Allen applies for a job in television and the director asks him, “Do you have any experience in television?” Allen replies, “Nobody in television has any experience.”

The former television writer Max Wilk recalled in *The Golden Age of Television*, “It was all new and terrifyingly complex. Until now no one had ever tried to do it before, nobody really knew how to do anything.” In 1949, the director Delbert Mann was hired as a floor manager by NBC even though he had never seen a TV program before; Mann soon became a TV director. Wilk said, “An ‘old hand’ was somebody who’d worked on the show last week. Scripts were often written overnight and rewritten before breakfast; it was no business for anyone over 35 with even a vaguely nervous stomach [Ed Sullivan was then 47 with an explosive ulcer]. Improvisation, angst, tension were the daily diet, along with endless deliveries of delicatessen sandwiches, black coffee, and hourly doses of what every CBS secretary kept in her desk drawer—aspirin and uppers in large bottles, referred to as ‘CBS candy.’”

TV was far more suspect, more foreign, and trickier than radio had been. Not only wasn’t television really radio, it also was not exactly movies, nor was it quite theater. It stole a little from each, in varying degrees. Radio was portable but TV was stationary and demanded your undivided attention—it was the appliance that came to dinner. Television made more grandiose claims on its audience than radio did. You could go about your life—mopping the kitchen floor, mowing the lawn, washing

the car, driving to work, fixing dinner—with radio in your ear or in the background, but TV required you to stop everything and focus on a fixed screen.

For physical comics, TV was a godsend. Milton Berle, who had been a severely straitjacketed radio star, a nightclub comic dependent solely on vocal slapstick for laughs, and a failed film actor, suddenly burst anew on screen in an explosion of medieval burlesque shtick that—because it was now on TV—*appeared* new, hilarious, irresistible. Television was treading air in those days, trying frantically to come up with something that would captivate an easily hypnotized nation of 150 million potential, willing subjects.

In those days, it didn't take a genius to come up with a new TV show. As one video pioneer remembered, "You could say, 'I've got a great idea for a show: Robert Montgomery.' Period. It was bought. Nobody asked: Robert Montgomery doing *what*? You could buy 'Toast of the Town' for \$7000. 'Arthur Godfrey and His Friends' cost \$10,000. 'Texaco Star Theater' cost \$15,000." He added, "Shows were dreamed up in men's rooms and sold moments later over a couple of martinis." No focus groups, audience-testing devices, or market surveys. It was seat-of-the-pants show business.

Radio was still vital and omnipotent, while television was given so little serious attention in those first days that CBS-TV consisted of a few cubicles at 485 Madison Avenue, a few makeshift studios above Grand Central Terminal, and rented rehearsal spaces around town. Warily, the networks responded with the trite and true—dramatic series ("Ford Television Theater Hour," "ABC Television Players"), private eyes ("Martin Kane, Private Eye," "Barney Blake, Police Reporter"), game shows ("Break the Bank," "Winner Takes All"), sportscasts ("The Gillette Cavalcade of Sports," "Wrestling from Park Arena"), newscasts ("The Camel Newsreel," "Douglas Edwards with the News"), variety shows ("The Original Amateur Hour," "Super Circus"), and the first TV situation comedy ("Mary Kay and Johnny"). It was no coincidence that the first TV stars were puppets, not people—Kukla and Ollie, Beanie, and Howdy Doody, plus the animated "Crusader Rabbit." Flesh-and-blood performers weren't quite ready to risk their careers.

So while the new gee-whiz technology was there—TV was hailed everywhere as a "miracle"—where were all the miraculous gee-whiz performers?

In the dawn of the Television Age, all the old showbiz rules no longer applied. TV lacked any stars of its own. Anyone could apply for star-

dom, and all sorts of performing misfits wound up as TV stars: Arthur Godfrey, most visibly, a chatty Washington, D.C., radio announcer; but also a burned-out burlesque comic reborn as a kiddie star—Pinky Lee, the Pee Wee Herman of his day; an ex-carnival barker with a freckle-faced marionette named Howdy Doody—Bob Smith; a bald, aging dance instructor—Arthur Murray; a grinning lounge pianist—Liberace; a forgotten movie cowboy—William Boyd (Hopalong Cassidy); an ex-science teacher with a roomful of gadgets—“Mr. Wizard”; an itinerant Midwestern dance band leader who spoke broken English—Lawrence Welk; and a priest with a Count Dracula cape, dark gleaming eyes, and serene sermons—Bishop Fulton J. Sheen (Berle’s major rival, preaching on the show “Life Is Worth Living,” on the DuMont network).

The most highly praised program in 1948, cited by critics for its whimsical charm and sophistication, was a grownup Punch & Judy show, “Kukla, Fran and Ollie.” There had been no puppets on radio, of course, except for Charlie McCarthy and Mortimer Snerd, whom ventriloquist Edgar Bergen fashioned into quasi-human figures; the idea of puppets on radio was such a bizarre concept that the show was a huge hit.

Out of this primitive talent tar pit in 1948, in television’s Paley-ozoic era, crawled a hunched, slightly Neanderthal figure named Ed Sullivan, by then a slightly frayed Broadway gossip columnist, a veteran of World War II benefits, and the sometime host of vaudeville’s last hurrah. Fumblingly, he found a toehold on the screen, then a niche, then a devoted mass audience, and eventually a lifelong position as TV’s cultural commissar. So, full-time network television and Ed Sullivan were hatched the same year, 1948, and, after a struggle to live under the same roof, spent 23 happy seasons together.

The story of Ed Sullivan’s show is a window on early television. Sullivan’s show arrived at a time when America was in a mood for whatever a makeshift TV host decided to serve up for dessert after Sunday dinner. The country’s postwar defenses were down, and TV was a wide-open showbiz frontier, with formats fluid and unsettled. It was an ideal climate for show business mavericks, hustlers, has-beens, and never-weres, a hothouse in which all ancient and emerging forms could flourish.

Perhaps the prospect of returning to a prewar theatrical form, vaudeville, carried a subtle sentimental appeal—old wine now served in a new square bottle. The variety show had been a reliable radio format, with its hosts, guests, banter, songs, and comedy sketches, first hammered out on Rudy Vallee’s “Fleischmann Hour” in 1928 and molded into radio

art on Bing Crosby and Al Jolson's "Kraft Music Hall" in the 1940s and 1950s.

Vaudeville was basic rock-bottom, no-frills entertainment, and Ed Sullivan was the perfect no-frills guy to get it up and running again. Berle's show was a kind of rough-and-tumble neovaudeville, but closer in spirit to burlesque, without the seedy strippers and raunchy gags. The manic hub of Berle's show was, of course, Uncle Miltie, whose guests were just excuses for him to burst in and further ham it up.

Vaudeville was in vogue again, reinvented out of sheer desperation. In 1949, Berle wrote, "Despite the really arduous task of putting on a full-hour video show each week, it really has been a pleasure to have had a part in bringing back to the people of the United States what I consider one of the greatest forms of entertainment we've ever seen. America has been the poorer since old vaudeville passed away, and it makes a lot of us troupers, who made our start and were weaned in the wings of the old Palace and other theaters, feel darn good to have television—the newest of all media—be the means of bringing back one of the happiest phases of American life."

John Lahr, the *New Yorker* theater critic, noted as late as 1997, "We're still living off the energy of vaudeville." And as David Kehr wrote in a *New York Times* review of a DVD featuring restored Vitaphone vaudeville shorts, "To watch [a classic act] soft-shoe their way through . . . the turn that had sustained them as vaudeville headliners for years, is to be transported back in time to an orchestra seat at the Palace." Vaudeville, recalled the ex-vaudeville hooper Buddy Ebsen, "produced a feeling of well-being." And as Margo Jefferson pointed out in "Some Books Are Worth Giving," her review of a 2006 vaudeville history, "In the late 19th century, vaudeville's managers decided to divorce it from bawdy saloons and low-life clubs patronized only by men. They stressed the pure and wholesome to attract women and children."

This was Ed Sullivan's concept exactly—to capture the whole family, from grandkids to granny, to drag everyone into his vast elastic television tent, creating global entertainment before "global" got fashionable. Sullivan may have invented the TV variety show, but he was simply repackaging and reclaiming shows he had reveled in while growing up. He was creating a form of restoration theater. His acts recalled performers in music halls like Tony Pastor's Opera House on 14th Street in New York, and the sumptuous uptown Olympia Theatre at Broadway and 44th Street, where Oscar Hammerstein (lyricist Oscar Hammerstein II's

impresario grandfather) erected a music-hall-cum-movie-house that booked every sort of act. Hammerstein hired not just pop singers and comics but also—as Sullivan later did—literal headliners like heavyweight Jack Johnson, Captain Cook (who claimed he discovered the North Pole), Lady Hope (displaying her enormous diamond), and a murderess on probation, Florence Burns (she danced).

For Hammerstein's enterprising son, Willie, who booked the Olympia, the more sensational the act, the better—creating a bill that was a fizzy, intoxicating blend of show business and tabloid journalism. Sullivan modeled his own “Toast of the Town” on the revered shows at the Palace Theatre, the entertainment mecca whose stars became, well, yes, the toast of the town. Sullivan's version became a video Palace Theatre; a later 1964 TV rip-off called itself “The Hollywood Palace,” hoping to steal the thunder from Sullivan's version of the revered music hall. So when Sullivan's show arrived in 1948, vaudeville was still stirring—or, in the words of critic Stefan Kanfer, “a lively ghost.”

Sullivan once wrote that, for all its gaudiness and appeal, old-time vaudeville lacked a lively pace—and he sped up the pace for his viewers. “Acts that did 17 minutes in vaudeville found themselves equally effective when cut to six minutes on TV,” he said. “A singer singing one song can be just as effective as if he or she sang six songs. And the singer learns that it extends his lifetime on TV, too.” He would fly an act in from Europe and unapologetically cut it to three minutes, explaining, “But that three minutes was the real core of their specialty.”

Sullivan observed sagely, “You were a willing captive in vaudeville. In TV, there is no captive audience. All that listeners have to do in their living room is lean over and turn the dial, to release themselves from captivity.” He insisted, “Vaudeville never died. Vaudeville was coldly and deliberately murdered by the owners of theater circuits. The assassination occurred at the exact minute when theater chain operators discovered that a Clark Gable or a Jean Harlow, teamed in a picture, could pack a theater to capacity without any help from live performers. Eagerly and happily, theater chain operators killed vaudeville, shuttered the dressing rooms, and pocketed the additional weekly receipts.”

Television was neovaudeville's resurrection, granting once popular old-timers like Bill Robinson, a potential rebirth, a chance to revive their classic but aging acts and add a few years to fraying careers. The bad news was that many old-timers' routines would be old after a single coast-to-coast outing. One-trick vaudeville ponies and supper club warhorses—

comedians with a finely tuned 27 minutes of material, or whose hook was a catchphrase and a few dog-eared shticks—were played out in a few weeks on TV.

The most resourceful ex-vaudevillians—Berle, Red Skelton, Burns & Allen, Jack Carter, Bud Abbott & Lou Costello, Danny Thomas, George Gobel, Bob Hope, Martha Raye, Morey Amsterdam, Jackie Gleason—found a way to recycle themselves on TV after years of running in place in radio, clubs, or films. The more resilient comics found a refuge, and rerun annuity, in situation comedies, which remains the most efficient way for a hot new comedian to burn up material and still cook without flaming out as a personality.

Video variety shows were electronic vaudeville. When Sullivan's version came along, it was naively dismissed as simply the spirit of vaudeville past, but he had more ambitious plans for the newly reborn form. Yes, he would have animal acts, acrobats, comics, singers, and an emcee—but no banter, no sketches, no mingling. He would cram the stage with acts of every kind—lowbrow, highbrow, middlebrow, no-brow.

Sullivan had come of age watching true theatrical vaudeville and had a passion for it, a feel for it, but it served merely as the starter dough for what would become "Toast of the Town," the show's first title, which people often confused, calling it "Talk of the Town" (from the *New Yorker's* lead section) or even "Little Old New York" (the title of Ed's own column). Sullivan, considered an anachronism himself, not only revived but, more significantly, streamlined a dead art form. As Jeffrey Hart commented in his book about the 1950s, *When the Going Was Good!*, "Vaudeville rose from the dead on 'Toast of the Town.'" Or as Bob Hope more memorably put it, "TV is the box that vaudeville was buried in."

"TV *became* vaudeville," said onetime baby vaudevillian Rose Marie, herself resurrected on 1960's "Dick Van Dyke Show." It was the simplest format to reproduce in TV's awkward, unformed infancy. As Berle said, "TV needed to establish itself quickly in 1948," and vaudeville was an old, recognizable friend. Vaudeville also was the ultimate family entertainment, thus ideal for TV, which was custom-made for knockabout physical comics like Berle, Skelton, Raye, Ed Wynn, and Bobby Clark. However, Clark and Wynn quickly washed out, throwbacks to a too-distant showbiz past; and two years after he won an Emmy for best show in 1949, Ed Wynn was history, segueing out of comedy and into acting.

"The Ed Sullivan Show" was always hailed, or ridiculed, as merely televised vaudeville, and this is far too facile a reading of its secret. While Sullivan famously, compulsively, cannily peppered the show with vaude-

ville acts, traditional vaudeville had the luxury of time, whereas he had to edit and alternate acts so viewers weren't tempted to change channels. He was able to jam eight acts into 60 minutes (less commercials). Few acts ran beyond seven minutes, and each had to prove itself airworthy at an afternoon audience run-through. Here, Sullivan might hurriedly, ruthlessly, yank an act for reasons of time or flatness, editing by instinct. Only hours before airtime, he would pull apart his running order to create a faster, livelier show. He was a wizard at such showbiz calculus.

Sullivan didn't merely erect his empire on vaudeville's ruins; he improved on vaudeville and rebuilt it to suit himself. As Jeff Kesseloff noted in his book *The Box*, the veteran TV producer-director Joseph Cates pointed out that, "in vaudeville, you start with an opening act and build to the closing. Ed said, 'It's television. You think people are gonna wait to see what you got at the end? This isn't vaudeville. People flip that knob.' He changed 'routine-ing,' he front-loaded. He would start with Elvis or the Beatles and say, 'They'll be back later in the program.' Then he'd bury the weak acts in the back." Cates added, "He knew that a variety show meant novelties. He worked even harder to get a balloon act than he did to get a star, because he knew the public tuned in for the novelty. He also recognized the contemporary nature of TV. If a guy pitched a no-hit game, he had him there in the audience to be introduced. Ed Sullivan was the Ziegfeld of our era. He didn't have a personality, but he didn't need one. He got the acts, and to get the acts you have to understand the country and the times. He did, and he was better at it than anybody else."

Theatrical vaudeville had often featured newsmakers torn from the tabloids—the flamboyant heavyweight champ Jack Johnson had an act, as did Evelyn Nesbitt, "The Girl on the Red Velvet Swing," whose husband, Harry Thaw, had murdered architect Stanford White, leading to the O. J. Simpson trial of the 1920s. John L. Sullivan starred in a cut-down version of "Uncle Tom's Cabin"; Helen Keller answered questions written into her palm; and Prohibitionist Carrie Nation gave speeches. Ed Sullivan refined this newsmaker-as-theater concept by seating front-page figures out front to take a bow on camera (at \$1,000 per wave).

As a result, Sullivan's show became a parade of one-hit wonders like Johnny Horton, singing "The Battle of New Orleans" as soldiers marched off to, and then mimed, an onstage battle, thus allowing Horton and other surprise hit-makers to keep working for years. The show also presented video scrapbooks of the era, or future time capsules, such as Nat King Cole crooning the no. 1 record of 1950, "Orange Colored Sky," with

two black showgirls from (Ed explained) “a great Negro show” at Small’s Paradise. On another show, Ed asked Buster Keaton to join him onstage before beginning a sketch, “Goin’ Fishin’,” first carefully explaining to young 1950s viewers exactly who Buster Keaton was.

As simple an idea as “vaudeo” seemed to be, it was really a totally new dimension in entertainment: before TV, before radio put vaudeville out of business, you paid cash at the local vaudeville house to watch a variety show. But Sullivan brought an entire vaudeville troupe to *your* house—not just now and then, but every Sunday night, free of charge, 52 weeks a year (not until the last years did it trail off to 39 weeks, of which 15 were reruns). Radio had done that, too, but you had to be satisfied with just voices. On radio, there were no whirling acrobats, cavoring poodles, magicians, jugglers, or dancers.

In her *New York Times* review of a vaudeville history, critic Margo Jefferson observed, “After all, isn’t America a kind of ethnic, social, and political variety show?” Sullivan understood the American taste for the spectacular, because he was so totally, intensely, American. Even if he wasn’t truly typical, he considered himself to be.

Now consider this: we are today four times further away from the first Ed Sullivan show (which took place some 60 years ago) than his first TV broadcast was from vaudeville’s heyday. Only 16 years separated vaudeville’s official death—the closing of the Palace Theatre, in 1932—from the debut of “Toast of the Town,” in 1948. Sullivan could book the historic, legendary vaudevillians Smith & Dale in 1957, because they were still alive and kicking.

The late 1940s seem not only a very different but also a very distant age, another galaxy away. The mood during this pretelevision era was sunny: College, a house, and a car were suddenly affordable dreams for everyone, thanks to the GI Bill and a robust economy. After the disruptions and uncertainties of a harrowing war, domestic life in America glowed (at least on the surface) with a long-postponed warmth. The war was over, people were planning careers, starting families, and buying washing machines and deep freezers. Another prized appliance was a newfangled box with a small window, a sort of radio gadget that flashed pictures.

But despite how the decade is always portrayed, especially on TV, the 1950s were not a warm and fuzzy period for everyone. “Father Knows Best,” “Make Room for Daddy,” and “The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet” to the contrary, there were still lynchings in the South, mostly

menial work for minorities, and few jobs for women beyond that of housewife, nurse, or teacher. Patriotic Americans were summoned to Washington to swear their official allegiance to the country, and many, such as teachers, were required to take loyalty oaths. While America's WASP power structure and a rigid class system had loosened, they remained basically intact. Once the war was all over, most people fell back into their prewar roles.

Americans, in a wild upset, elected as president a no-nonsense, down-to-earth Missourian, Harry Truman, over a sleek New York District Attorney, Thomas Dewey . . . scanned the scandalous Kinsey report on male sexuality . . . worried how many Communists were in the State Department, in Hollywood, and on the air . . . bought new long-playing records . . . first heard an impassioned North Carolina preacher named Billy Graham . . . and grudgingly accepted the first black player in baseball, Jackie Robinson. And Bostonians sent to Congress a shy, skinny navy vet, a rich political heir from Massachusetts with big hair, teeth, and ambition, and a big libido, named John F. Kennedy.

In 1948, newspapers headlined these major events: Israel becomes a state . . . President Truman asks Congress to adopt a civil rights program . . . the Supreme Court rules against teaching religion in public schools . . . three atomic bombs are tested . . . General Dwight Eisenhower becomes head of Columbia University . . . the Soviet Union closes its consulates in New York and San Francisco . . . the State Department's Alger Hiss, addressing the House Committee on Un-American Activities (whose members include the somber, intense California congressman Richard Nixon), denies Whittaker Chambers's charge that he's a Communist . . . a California court rules that anti-interracial marriage laws are unconstitutional . . . Queen Elizabeth II gives birth to a boy named Charles . . . and the United Nations outlaws genocide and draws up a Declaration of Human Rights. Death in 1948 claimed Mohandas Gandhi, Babe Ruth, Sergey Eisenstein, Charles Evans Hughes, Franz Lehár, General John Pershing, Hideki Tojo, and Dame May Whitty.

Serious readers' noses were stuck in "The Naked and the Dead," "How to Stop Worrying and Start Living," "Raintree County," "The Young Lions," and "The Life and Times of the Shmoo." James Michener won a Pulitzer Prize for "Tales of the South Pacific." Moviegoers lined up to see "Treasure of the Sierra Madre," "I Remember Mama," "The Snake Pit," "Johnny Belinda," "Sitting Pretty," "Sorry, Wrong Number," "Red River," and "Easter Parade." Bing Crosby was the no. 1 box office attraction for the fifth straight year, "Gentleman's Agreement" won the

Oscar for Best Picture of 1947, Howard Hughes bought RKO Studios, and Dalton Trumbo, John Howard Lawson, and Lester Cole of the Hollywood Ten refused to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee.

Staunchly all-American activities that year included the “Hit Parade” songs “Buttons and Bows,” “Nature Boy,” “I’m Looking Over a Four-Leaf Clover,” “It’s Magic,” “You Call Everybody Darling,” “The Woody Woodpecker Song,” “Manana,” “On a Slow Boat to China,” and a stocking stuffer, “All I Want for Christmas Is My Two Front Teeth.” Be-bop was hip. On Broadway, the hottest tickets were “Mister Roberts,” “Brigadoon,” “A Streetcar Named Desire,” “Carousel,” “Life with Mother,” “Anne of the Thousand Days,” “Light Up the Sky,” “Death of a Salesman,” “Where’s Charley?,” “Kiss Me, Kate,” “Tonight at 8:30,” “Inside U.S.A.,” and “Lend an Ear,” starring a quirky new face named Carol Channing.

Television’s prewar commercial future had been interrupted by Hitler and Hirohito, but in 1948 the box began popping up in taverns, store windows, and a few homes. Those first tentative, flickering TV shows were sparse in 1947 and filled with “ghosts,” snowy blizzards, and slanting images. Between 1947 and 1951, the number of TV sets soared from 6,000 to 12 million, but in 1948 there were a quarter million sets—not a lot, but enough to be taken seriously by the entertainment, news, communications, and advertising industries. That year, every hour of the networks’ logs was finally filled in.

Nothing thrilled Americans more in 1948 than staring at a zany called “Uncle Milty” on a squat, square brown box whose other lead attraction was a tall, unknown young comic with a sour expression and frantic eyes, Sid Caesar. The star of a fresh, inventive satirical Saturday night revue called “Your Show of Shows,” Caesar was the cutting-edge opposite of Berle’s ancient, anarchic clowning.

Meanwhile, crouched over his typewriter at the *New York Daily News*, a used-up Broadway columnist and wannabe TV star named Ed Sullivan was about to seize the day.