

AMERICAN BLASPHEMY: THE HONEYMOONERS

By Michael Ventura

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In 1955, General Motors became the first corporation to earn more than \$1 billion in one year ... Thorazine was developed ... James Dean died in a car crash ... *Blackboard Jungle* introduced the (white) world to a new music with "Rock Around the Clock" ... Marilyn Monroe starred in *The Seven Year Itch*, a film that based its premise on a still-novel innovation: air conditioning ... Tennessee Williams published *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Vladimir Nabokov published *Lolita* ... Rosa Parks refused to sit at the back of the bus, leading Martin Luther King Jr., to instigate the Montgomery Bus Boycott and initiate the civil rights movement ... The Supreme Court ordered the desegregation of schools ... Charles Mingus recorded "Picanthropus Erectus," but few were aware of it, while Lawrence Welk played bubble-music weekly on national TV and no one could avoid being aware of *that* ... There were few computers, and each took a big room to house, and none had the power of a rinky-dink PC today ... Eisenhower was president, 25% of Americans lived in poverty, HUAC's blacklists were in full force, and the Cold War was the air one breathed: Atomic bombs exploded an hour's drive northwest of Las Vegas at the rate of 10 a year, and all were assured the mushroom clouds posed no health hazard ... Chinese Communists and Nationalists were fighting for possession of islands in the Formosa (Taiwan) Straits ... In October of 1955 Elvis Presley was still six months away from his first national hit, and two versions of "The Yellow Rose of Texas" (Mitch Miller's and Johnny Desmond's) were in the Top Ten ... and on October 1 a half-hour show called *The Honeymooners* slipped in some uneasy truths under cover of laughter.

No one dreamed that 45 years later you could zap across a hundred channels and still see that show, as though it had never left and we had never changed -- and no one anticipated that it would still be funny to the extent that we had not changed.

In Brooklyn in '55 we watched *The Honeymooners* not only because it was funny but because it rendered the way we actually lived. There on our grainy black-and-white TV was a tenement kitchen much like ours. There was the same featureless grimy wallpaper, impossible to clean, that seemed to have faded into the brick. Like many we knew, Ralph (Jackie Gleason) and Alice (Audrey Meadows) didn't yet have a refrigerator, just an old-timey icebox. Their only electrical appliance was a toaster. And like everyone we knew, they yelled all the time -- they *liked* yelling, they weren't afraid of raised voices and broad gestures and empty threats. (How strange it would be, much later, to encounter WASPs for whom yelling was taboo, a fundamental intrusion upon normalcy.) "One-a these days, Alice, *Pow!*; right in the kisser!" -- and Alice just looked at Ralph serenely, judgmentally, fearlessly, because she knew he was the one who was fearful, fearful that at any moment his fragile manhood and tenuous self-respect would dissolve before the strength of her fatalism, as it dissolved every day in the working world where he was just another nameless cog. Just like our fathers and mothers.

Their comedy was structured on a contradiction in terms: slapstick irony. Even, or especially, in the title: they were called "honeymooners," but the honeymoon had ended long ago -- they seemed to know each other so well that nothing surprised them, though they continually feigned surprise. Their feigning had become, if anything, the basis of their relationship -- like most of our mothers and fathers, and like most mothers and

fathers, husbands and wives, anywhere. They often spoke of being married 14 years, yet strangely they had no children -- was she barren, he infertile? That figured too.

Barrenness of possibility (an American blasphemy!) was at the heart of all their dead-end situations -- and who wanted *those* people to have children anyway? It wouldn't be funny with children, it would be chaotic and frightening, as our households were. Yet there was a tenderness in this barrenness: They were stuck with each other, and only each other, and stuck with their silly neighbors and their only friends, Ed (Art Carney) and Trixie (Joyce Randolph), and if they didn't love each other who would love them? *That* was the always lurking assumption that lifted their low-comedy routines to high-comedy heights. In a time of nuclear families, Ralph and Alice were a nuclear (as in: atom bomb) couple - - foreshadowing an era not far off, when as many people would live alone and in couples as lived in Mom-and-Dad households.

And they were working-stiffs -- Ralph driving a bus to nowhere, Ed dredging the sewers of nowhere, while their wives stayed home (which was nowhere) and did nothing, or next to nothing.

Which is what the show that aired on October 1, 1955, was all about.

The answer to nothing was: TV. For this was a televised household without a television. And now Alice wanted one, and Ralph was too stingy to buy it. And she lays it on him as tough as any woman who ever confronted a man with an ultimatum: "You're out all day long. And at night what are you doin'? Spending money playing pool, spending money bowling, and paying dues at the crazy lodge you belong to. And I'm left here, to look at the icebox, the stove, the sink, and these four walls. Well, I don't *wanna* look at that icebox, that stove, that sink, and these four walls. *I wanna look at Liberace!*"

Liberace ... the flagrant faggot in the fancy frills who frowned flimsy tunes on a bright white grand. She's got Ralph, but she'd rather have Liberace. The testicles of America's men shivered and shriveled under the belts of their nervous laughter.

Liberace was an enormous TV hit in '55. Women loved him, men pretended to loathe him yet watched as avidly as their wives. Don't ask, don't tell ... but everybody knew. There was nothing closeted about Liberace. Liberace was the first openly gay character held to the welcoming bosom of mainstream broadcast media. Technically, his piano-playing was of the highest caliber, while his taste -- or his showy lack of it -- was a warm if condescending joke. He laughed all the way to the casino: America wanted to stare at a dipsy homosexual as long as he had no content and could flatter their sentimentality. As far as he was concerned, the joke was on them. As Liberace's rock & roll counterpart, Little Richard, would say: Good golly, Miss Molly.

The feminist and gay liberation movements were still more than a decade away, but Alice hated her four walls and preferred, shall we say, the flexibility of Liberace's persona to the raucous macho apologia of Ralph's -- at least as far as wanting to be entertained went. She knew she couldn't win, but she wasn't going to lose either. And Jackie Gleason, the governing genius of the show -- age 39 when this episode aired -- knew *that* score. John Wayne was the biggest male box office draw of that era, and Brando was the sexiest, but Gleason, the most famous fat man of his generation, was hell-bent on tearing down every traditional idea of manhood in sight. Week after week he would make himself ridiculous as a way of saying: Is this what you assholes are willing to settle for?

Talk about post-modern: Ralph and Ed go halves on buying the new TV, though of course Ralph connives to have it sit in his kitchen. The shot is set brilliantly. We never see what's on their TV screen. We look over the back of the TV at Ralph and Ed

watching *Captain Video* (a popular kid's show) and the *Late Show* (the first technological seduction to stay up past one's bedtime). The effect is that *we* are the television that's watching them; while actually we, who are watching television, are watching them watch television -- so we're watching ourselves, while conferred with the temporary luxury of feeling superior to these reflections of ourselves. And all this is accomplished with no artifice, with nothing that calls attention to itself, and above all with no snideness.

The faults and weaknesses of Ralph and Ed are never spared, but their relentless yet feeble pursuit of happiness within limited circumstances is seen as almost gallant and certainly lovable. The artificiality and unfairness of the subordination of their wives is constantly revealed and never mocked. Trixie, Ed's wife, tells Alice cheerily, "You'll never get somethin' [from Ralph] by beggin'. Husbands just love to see us beg." The laugh-track covers, and gently apologizes for, the cruel shock of the line.

And what do Ralph and Ed do with their television? Argue, fuss with the set's reception, and fall asleep to a re-run of a Charlie Chan movie. Welcome home, America. For this *will* be your home: you'll fall asleep to the flickering light of the screen, your attention spans exhausted by triviality.

Alice emerges from the bedroom in her bathrobe, looks severely at Ralph and Ed asleep in their chairs, gets a blanket, spreads it over them, and, as though delivering a benediction, says softly but sternly: "I gotta admit, Ralph, for once in your life you were right -- we never should have gotten a television set."

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