

ON THE AIR

## Ernie Kovacs, A Major Loss

By BERNIE HARRISON

Star TV Critic

In those early, exciting years of the medium when there were network shows from a half-dozen cities and all of them (an estimable proportion) were "live," NBC presented, from Philadelphia, a summer replacement for the weeknight Kukla, Fran and Ollie series. His name was Ernie Kovacs and this reporter's review, on July 21, 1951, was headed:

"Kovacs' Show is Different—  
But Dull."

"He cannot be separated from a cigar," we noted. But "he works in a relaxed manner and does have an awareness of the distinction between radio and TV comedy. His stuff is visual and while it may not convulse this viewer, appears to have a paralyzing effect on his aides."

"Their high regard seems to be genuine—and it is this quality that has returned us . . . again and again to check the program."

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Not too many years later, in the ballroom of New York's Plaza Hotel, we were helping hand out the Sylvania awards to a number of performers, among them the same Mr. Kovacs. It was an unusual award in one sense in that his show, a summer replacement, had not returned for the fall.

After the award, an elated Kovacs came over to the judges' table. "You have no idea what this means to them," Kovacs said, pumping our hand and pointing to his table, where his director, writers and other aides were seated.

This was typical of Kovacs and a measure of the man. The award couldn't have meant less to him; what counted was the boost it gave to his former associates—who needed it at the time.

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We had long since become a Kovacs admirer, of course. That first summer show, successful or not, was his springboard into network TV. As he picked up experience on the old DuMont network and as a late-night substitute on NBC, Kovacs began to come into his own; a comedian with a fantastic curiosity about the medium and a stubborn determination to find out what could and couldn't be done. Out of these trials, gropings and experiments along the outer limits—and beyond—came a growing gallery of characters, ideas and techniques.

"There is no such thing as comic genius," Sid Caesar once

had possibilities and form of its own.

The 42-year-old innovator was not a silent movie comic; not a movie comic, nor a vaudeville, nor a burlesque, nor a night club, nor a musical comedy comic. He was a TV comic.

In this respect, he was unique. Of him, it could never be said—"But you haven't seen him until you see him in person." When you saw him work in TV, he was doing what could be done nowhere else.

Let's hope the TV Academy will take some note of this strange, wonderful man's career during the Emmy ceremonies. An award in his memory—to inventive TV comedy—could be established. It might prompt the networks to give new performers an opportunity to work and grow—on summer TV, maybe. Or perhaps it might be better to give it to a local station which does the most to further the cause of new talent. I think that Kovacs, wherever he is dealing the cards, would have liked the latter.

snapped at the height of his fame. "Edison didn't ad-lib the electric light."

Out of Kovacs fertile mind came the mincing poet, Percy Dovetonsils, sipping martinis behind his book; the Nairobi Trio, a classic counterpoint of slapstick and weird music, and with his creations, a sharp eye for the inconsistencies and idiocies of current TV practice and commercials. Who can forget the show that opened with the "perfume" girl who raised her head beneath the big floppy hat, opened her mouth, and got creamed. Or that recent "silent movie" in which Kovacs, as the detective of a thousand masterful disguises, was revealed—via a superimposition of heads—as a shaggy dog, combing the hair out of his eyes?

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Lately, Kovacs had devoted most of his time to movie roles but he was still loyal to TV and fortunate enough to find a sponsor (Dutch Masters) who was so enchanted with his smoking habit that it let him do anything—including the commercials. Who but Ernie would have listed his own show in the credits as an "El Cheapo" production?

The more stereotyped TV became, the more daring and ambitious—and indifferent to ratings—he became. There were no "name" guests on his shows. Those who watched him were those who were indifferent to casual, easy comedy and believed, with him, that TV, while a medium of communication,

1962



Only last October 8, the Kovacs family had been involved in another auto accident, that one in their own driveway.

Mrs. Mary Kovacs, 61, Ernie's mother, had parked her car on his steep driveway and was unloading packages when the car started rolling. The open door knocked her down and one wheel passed over her chest, injuring her.

Mr. Kovacs and his singing star wife had lived the way folks used to think of movie stars as living—in a gadget-filled, 17-room Coldwater Canyon home full of his collections: Armor, antique lamps, first editions, carvings and statuary. It boasted such things as an indoor waterfall, a driveway turntable and a wine cellar that took second place to few.

Scarcely known in most places a few years ago, Mr. Kovacs had won fame on television and in movies with his zany antics, such as curling his lip over his moustache and staring squarely into the camera, giving a surprising cyclops-like effect.

#### First Movie in 1957

Mr. Kovacs' first movie was "Operation Mad Ball" in 1957. He played a stuffy superior officer who vied with co-star Jack Lemmon for the affections of nurse Kathryn Grant.

That role pegged him and producers cast him as a captain many times thereafter. His latest was as a captain in "Sail a Crooked Ship."

Mr. Kovacs was the son of a Hungarian tavern owner at Trenton, N. J. He had sung in stock companies in the East and played bit parts before taking part in a talent audition on Broadway which hit the jackpot. Offers poured in. And, unpredictably, in the midst of the

furor he went to work in a drugstore.

Before making the bigtime nationally he had made a hit in the East with his Ernie Kovacs TV Show.

On TV Mr. Kovacs' sponsors let him do pretty much as he pleased. His final TV special was a show without words.

"There's too much talk on TV," he said.

In his early TV days, in the early 50s, he established such notable institutions as "The Early Eyeball Fraternal Marching Society." He was a columnist for the Trentonian at Trenton from 1945 to 1950, and at various times did stints at radio disc jockeying, running a TV cooking show, and managing his own stock company.

#### Made Several Movies

Among his movies were "Bell, Book and Candle," "It Happened to Jane," "Our Man in Havana" and "Cry for Happy."

Miss Adams, Mr. Kovacs' second wife, and he had a child, Mia Susan, born in 1959. He had two other daughters by his first wife. They were Betty, 15, and Kippie, 13.

"I never want to leave home," he told an interviewer recently. "I never want to leave my wife. My Kids. I love my home."

There were fewer more colorful characters than Mr. Kovacs, who spent more on cigars than many people earn—about \$20 a day.

He came to Hollywood with a reputation of being one of television's most inventive comics—a writer, producer, star and director of many shows that were television classics.

He soon became a movie star by doing it the hard way. In his first picture, he told the toughest studio boss in town to go to hell.

As a result, he wound up with a \$600,000 house, a price of \$200,000 a picture and a reputation as one of the brightest movie comedy finds in years.

People in Hollywood who told

off the late Harry Cohn and kept working at Columbia Studios could be counted on the thumb of one hand.

"We were making 'Operation Mad Ball,'" Mr. Kovacs once recalled. "It was a party sequence with lots of drunken GIs and lots of pretty French girls. About 4 a.m., this character comes up to me and says, 'I hear you've been having a ball chasing these pretty starlets around the set all night.'"

"Actually, that's what I was supposed to be doing but I figured it was none of this guy's business so I told him to go to hell."

Mr. Kovacs later was told that it was Mr. Cohn, trypanical boss of Columbia Pictures.

"For some reason, Harry and I became great friends after that. Don't ask me why."

Director Richard Quine, who directed his first picture and several afterward, once said that Mr. Kovacs was so brilliant with comedy that he didn't need to see a script.

#### Loved to Gamble

Mr. Kovacs was one of the town's better known gamblers.

Once a friend called him from New York. Mr. Kovacs asked if he had a deck of cards in his desk.

The voice 3,000 miles away replied yes.

"Okay," said Mr. Kovacs, "Cut them. I say red for \$500."

Ernie recalled that there was silence on the other end of the line, then profanity.

He next gave his opponent a bet that the next card would be a spade for \$500.

Once again there was silence on the other end. And the next mail brought a check for \$1,000.

Mr. Kovacs was a gourmet in his food tastes, a frequent diner at such restaurants as Chasen's, Romanoff's and Larue's.

Then he hired a cook and paid her \$1,000 a month.

"She is so great that I eat home every night now," he said recently, "because I'm afraid I'll miss something for supper."

