

1977



The late Ernie Kovacs was killed in an automobile accident in 1962.

## 'The Best of Ernie Kovacs'

By Lawrence Laurent

for 10 weeks

**E**rnie Kovacs was an authentic comedy genius who understood, before anyone else, that television humor was a new, separate and distinct way of making people laugh. He died in January, 1962 before the complete maturing of his genius and, even so, he left behind some of the finest moments in comedy.

Some of the finest moments of this original, off-beat laugh maker will be revived for "The Best of Ernie Kovacs" over the next 10 weeks. The series will be telecast at 9:30 p.m., Tuesday on Channel 26 and will be offered twice a week — 9:30 p.m., Wednesday and 10:30 p.m., Saturday — on 53/14.

Kovacs, tall and with a mustache that helped his powerful expression of helplessness in a world often mad, didn't look like a comedian. He looked like a river boat gambler, the kind of a guy who asked kindly if someone would explain poker to him while he shuffled the cards with his left hand. Still, he listened to a different drummer and he marched to his own visions.

In the first program one will find the series of "girl in the tub" blackouts and the poetry of Percy Dovetonsils. One will find a view of the U.S. space program as seen through the eyes of two monkeys. Kovacs had the

kind of profound knowledge of music that can be acquired by working as a professional radio disc jockey (which he did) and his "musical visualizations" remain fresh. Two of those are in the first program. Finally, there's a look at the television western, or what Kovacs called "the beat it to death" syndrome.

After Kovacs died at the age of 43, his wife, Edie Adams, gathered his videotapes and kinescopic recordings and put them in a Los Angeles warehouse. In particular, the storage included the work of his last years when he was doing monthly specials for the Consolidated Cigar Company, which gave him complete artistic freedom. He made eight such specials, working endless hours to create elaborate and expensive special effects. He performed extraordinary editing feats and ran up production costs that are still being discussed in tones tinged with awe.

David Erdman of WTTW (public TV) in Chicago is the producer of this series. He's aware of the limitations of his source material, but he doesn't care. Erdman has said: "... the type of comedy we've excerpted . . . would never get on a commercial network today. Aside from the fact that it is in black-and-white, the pace is too slow

TV Channels/The Washington Post/April 10, 1977

in spots, the comedy too abstruse in others, and at times it takes too long to build toward a proper peak. Today's audiences are conditioned to much faster-paced, broad-brush comedy. . . and lightning-quick production helped along by electronic devices such as fades, freezes and dissolves, which didn't exist in Kovacs day.

"But the point is, had Kovacs survived all these years he probably still would be far out in front of the industry and his peers in his taste as well as with the use of these new technical devices. He was involved in television for only about 10 years and yet he made an enormous impact that lives on in the work of others.

"Think what he could have done in another 15 years."

Well, let's be grateful for what he left behind.



# The Best

# of Ernie Kovacs

1977

# Is Plenty Good Enough

By Sander Vanocur

**T**HE BEST OF Ernie Kovacs," a series of 10 weekly half-hour programs beginning Tuesday at 9:30 p.m. on Channel 26, does more than illustrate how Kovacs first used television technology for comedic effect.

The series also demonstrates how little has been done with television technology since Kovacs' tragic death in a car crash in 1962.

Kovacs created such characters as Percy Dovetonsils, the near-sighted poet whose martini olives were attached to a daisy; Matzoh Heppelwhite, drunken itinerant magician; Wolfgang Sauerbraten, wacky German disc jockey; and the Nairobi trio, three apes with derby hats playing music. All would have been funny even without the technological innovations Kovacs used in his television shows.

But his genius lay in his ability to go beyond the traditional stand-up comedian, doing on television what he or

she had done on radio or before a proscenium arch in a theater. Kovacs had the vision to let the medium itself become part of the performance.

In the second show, there is ample

## Television

evidence of the directions he took the medium in his efforts to produce laughter. A man is watching a couple on television, in a canoe. A man watching takes a hand-drill and drills a hole

through the top of the television set and into the bottom of the canoe, which sinks.

There is also a marvelous scene in an office, devoid of people, that illustrates how Kovacs used music and television for effect. A typewriter's keys move to the beat of the music, a fountain pen on a desk shoots ink, phone receivers dance, drawers move in and out, the level of water in a water machine moves up and down, the handle on a pencil sharpener moves around and around.

The material, a great deal of it taken from eight specials Kovacs did for Consolidated Cigars on ABC in 1961-62, is in black and white. No adjustment of your set will be necessary. The only adjustment will be in your mind as you marvel at the freshness of the material, whether you are old enough to have seen it in the original version or young enough never to have seen it before.

There hasn't been much like it since that time. George Schlatter, Kovacs'

friend and unabashed admirer, picked up where Kovacs left off in the production of "Laugh-In." (The lady in the bathtub in the first show is Jolene Brand, Schlatter's wife.) Monty Python came next. And in the current issue of TV Guide, Chevy Chase credits Kovacs with having a major influence on his writing and his brand of humor.

That about rounds out the list. Apart from the above, I cannot think of any major comedic efforts on television that have sought to capitalize on what Kovacs started to do more than 20 years ago.

The same is true of noncomedic productions in television. Besides the instant replay and the use of the split screen in sporting events, there has been little use of television technology to enhance the story television is trying to tell us.

News is the worst. Despite all the much-vaunted proclamations that news executives sound about their new equipment (usually at network affiliates' conventions), television news has been notably backward in its development and use of available technology.

There is a reason. Despite their fascination with their technological toys, most people in television news are still the psychological prisoners of print. How else can one explain their propensity to call anything outside the format of the evening news a "magazine"?

Kovacs never made that mistake. He loved words and used them well. But he understood from the beginning that the medium he was using was not merely another extension of the graphics revolution of the last century. He understood that he was working with electronic pictures, and he used those pictures, not as facts but as symbols. That is why he is missed.

