

1977

# 'The Best of Ernie Kovacs' Captures a Classic TV Funnyman

By JEFF GREENFIELD

**T**he best of Ernie Kovacs? That's what the Public Broadcasting System calls its 10-part series of half-hour programs, making its debut this Tuesday evening at 9:30 on Channel 13 and which offers selections from the work of one of television's funniest and most inventive artists.

The problem is that the more you remember of this cigar-smoking free spirit, the less you can agree that any limited dose of Kovacs can really recapture his best. From 1950 until his death

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in a car crash in 1962—just before his 43d birthday—Kovacs worked without barriers of time, place or convention. He performed on four networks (NBC, CBS, ABC and DuMont) and on local television in Philadelphia and New York. He did early-morning shows, he worked in mid-morning, he was on Tuesday nights at 8 P.M. (opposite Milton Berle and Bishop Fulton J. Sheen) and was a regular substitute host on the "Tonight Show" in the heyday of Steve Allen.

Kovacs performed live, sometimes without a script, improvising skits and camera angles on the air. And in the final year of his life, in monthly specials for ABC, he worked on tape, running up immense cost overruns in his efforts to open up the visual possibilities of the medium. He could tap into the most moss-backed burlesque and vaudeville traditions for a laugh, wreaking revenge

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*N.Y. Times 1977 Apr. 24*





on the over-glamorized "Coty Girl" or Loretta Young TV images with a well-planted custard pie in the face. In these last shows, dispensing with a studio audience and laugh tracks, Kovacs played with television as no one did before and as few have done since: the "1812" Overture was offered with snapping celery stalks as cymbals, file drawers for wind instruments. Running gags and blackouts were used, with visual surprises serving as punchlines: an Indian, trying to shoot an arrow, would progressively find his bow broken, bent, melted, the arrow moving backwards, until the anticipation of the quirk became as funny as the quirk itself.

Of necessity, says producer David Erdman, most of the "Best of Ernie Kovacs" material has been drawn from the taped shows Kovacs did for ABC. "It was," he says, "a question of access. The kinescopes of the earlier shows contain mostly variety material, and a lot of it is of marginal quality." And while the series contains much of Kovacs's well-known sketches—the "Nairobi Trio," featuring three derbied apes assaulting a musical composition and each other; fatuous poet Percy Dovetonsils; Bavarian disc jockey Wolfgang von Sauerbraten—the shows sacrifice some of Kovacs's full-fledged pummeling of the conventions and hypocrisies that permeated television then as now.

It isn't that Kovacs was a crusader—neither in these 10 half-hours nor any of his shows I can remember is there evidence of a single topical or political comment—but that he found in the treacle of broadcasting an irresistible target of opportunity ("Thank you for letting us into your living room," he said once in obedience to the cliché of the day, "but couldn't you have cleaned it up a little?").

And some of his wildest moments

were cheerfully malicious abuses of the medium—with none of the "only kidding, folks," reassurances of a Bob Hope. When an early TV venture in Philadelphia was canceled—Kovacs was never a master of the ratings—he devoted his last show to dismembering the set with an ax. In 1956, during a summer replacement show, he placed the character of deranged Hungarian chef Miklos Molman in a show very much like "Howdy Doody." Miklos swilled wine from a bottle, brandished a whip over the terrorized kiddies of the peanut gallery and with a huge pair of shears cut the strings of the bubbly puppet. To watch the bleary-eyed Miklos sweep the lifeless hunk of wood from the set was a moment of sweet revenge for any child of the 1950's.

So my own, Philistine preferences lie less in the direction of Kovacs the Video Genius and more in the Hellzapoppin' quality of his early, live shows (one half-hour in the series is devoted to scenes from some of these early efforts). Still, these 10 half-hours are more than worth your attention, especially the attention of those who talk of television's inherently limited possibilities. Watch the famous half-hour in which no words are spoken; watch Kovacs use a tilted set and a camera prism in his "Eugene" sketch to turn gravity into a comic foil. Watch Matzoh Heppelwhite, the pickled magician, perform the world's most fatal sword trick with a decidedly unwilling volunteer.

It's not a laugh-a-minute and it's not supposed to be; in his brief introduction, narrator Jack Lemmon warns viewers to "slow down your internal clock; it was a more leisurely time." Let Kovacs build to his point, and be satisfied at times with a smile instead of a belly-laugh. What you'll see is a demonstration of what can happen when television is placed in the hands of someone who was delighted and not petrified by the possibilities of the medium. ■