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American Heritage

# THE ED SULLIVAN AGE

*He took vaudeville, Broadway, the tabloids,*
*and, with his strange, gray, tongue-tied genius,*
*melded them into a working model of a better America*

BY JOHN LEONARD

Each week since October 1988 I've delivered myself of a five-minute "media criticism," a sort of sermonette, on "CBS Sunday Morning." A dozen times in those eight years a stranger has stopped me on the street, at a movie, or waiting in line for a glimpse of Matisse to ask: "Do you write your own stuff?" To which I have learned to reply, passively aggressively, "Well, they didn't hire me for my looks." But at least it's a human question. More frequent and more mystifying is the suspicious stare, the abrupt nod, the pointed finger, and the accusation "I saw you on television." After which nothing. Not "I like what you said" or "You're full of crap" or "How much do they pay you?" Just "I … saw-you." And then the usual New York vanishing act, like Shane. This used to bother me a lot, as if the medium lacked substance, or I did, or the spectral street, maybe even Matisse. Lately, though, I've begun to wonder whether what such strangers really seek on the surprising street is assurance. The problem is epistemological. They saw me on television. I am real. Television might also be. After almost half a century of looking at the ghosts in our machines, we are agnostics about reality itself.

Never mind docudramas, re-creations, staged news, computer enhancements, or commercials that sell us cars by promising adventure and sell us beer by promising friendship. Our dubiety about television probably started with the quiz-show scandals in 1959. Oh how they wept, like Little Mermaids. That's one of the things I remember most about television in the fifties. Nixon cried in his Checkers speech. Jack Paar cried about his daughter. And Charles Van Doren cried because he'd been caught. So did Dave Garroway cry on the "Today" show because he was upset about Van Doren, who'd parlayed his "Twenty-one" winnings into a job as a "guest host" on Garroway's very own program. And because Dave was upset, so was his chimp, J. Fred Muggs. Who says men don't have feelings?

Enough fifties nostalgia. As much as we may have loved Lucy, what we did to our children was Howdy Doody and Captain Video. When John Cameron Swayze died recently, we ought to have been reminded of how bad television news used to be back when his "Camel News Caravan" was "hopscotching the world for headlines," before he went on to pitch Timex ("takes a licking and keeps on ticking"). Even the Golden Age of television drama was full of home-shopping Ibsens like Paddy Chayefsky and greeting-card Kafkas like Rod Serling, of bargain-

basement Italian neorealism and kitchen-sink Sigmund Freud, where everybody explained too much in expository gusts, yet all were simultaneously inarticulate, as if a want of eloquence was a proof of sincerity and an excess of sincerity guaranteed nobility of sentiment, like a bunch of clean old Tolstoy peasants. And how clean were they, really? So clean you never saw a black face, not even on a railroad porter. So clean that Chayefsky's own family in "The Catered Affair" had to be Irish instead of Jewish, as the butcher in "Marty" was somehow Italian. So clean that when Serling wanted to tell the story of Emmett Till, a black Chicago teenager lynched for whistling at a Mississippi white woman, "U.S. Steel Hour" turned it into a pawnbroker's murder in a Thornton Wilder sort of Our Town. So clean that the Mars candy-bar company would not allow a sin- gle reference on "Circus Boy" to competitive sweets like cookies or ice cream, and "The Alcoa Hour" was so solicitous of a good opinion about aluminum it wouldn't let Reginald Rose set a grim teleplay in a trailer park, and, most famously, the American Gas Company insisted on the removal of any mention of "gas chambers" from a "Playhouse 90" production of "Judgment at Nuremberg." A better beginning for any discussion of American television's childhood and prolonged adolescence in the Age of Faith is the original Mr. Ed. They didn't hire him for his looks.

*For twenty-three years a man who couldn't sing or dance or spin a plate entertained fifty million Americans.*

"To think that you're gonna be on television with **Ed Sullivan**," said *Jackie Mason,* "was comparable to a nightclub comedian in those days playing the epitome of a nightclub like the Copacabana. Or an opera singer being at the Met. Or if a guy is an architect that makes the Empire State Building. Or it was a guy that was a Nazi to be Adolf Hitler. This was the biggest."

This "biggest" lasted twenty-three years. From 1948 to 1971, every Sunday night at eight o'clock, a man who couldn't sing or dance or spin a plate entertained fifty million Americans. Never before and never again in the history of the Republic would so many gather so loyally, for so long, in the thrall of one man's taste. As if by magic, we were one big family. And what a lot of magic there was, as well as animals and acrobats, ventriloquists and marching bands, *David Ben-Gurion, Brigitte Bardot, and the Singing Nun*. All by himself on CBS, handpicking every act, **Ed Sullivan** was a one-man cable-television system with wrestling, BRAVO, and comedy channels, Broadway, Hollywood, and C-SPAN, sports and music video. We turned to him once a week in our living rooms for everything we now expect from an entire industry every minute of our semiconscious lives.

Tiresome as the boomers are, celebrating from their electronic nursery the nitwitticisms of "Leave It to Beaver," "Gilligan's Island," "The

Brady Bunch," "The Partridge Family," and "Happy Days," they have intuited a truth about television as a time line in our secret lives. It's as if this reservoir of images, consumed since childhood, stored on memory tape, amounted to something like the "pottery clock" of the archaeologists, like clam-bed fossils and dinosaur teeth. We carbon-date ourselves. I was ten years old when I first saw **Sullivan**, in 1949, talking to *Jackie Robinson* on a tiny flickering screen in my uncle's Long Beach, California, rumpus room. I was twelve when I realized that he'd be around forever, or at least a lot longer than your average stepfather. We were living then in Queens, New York, behind a tavern, lullabied to sleep each night by *Johnnie Ray* on a jukebox, singing "The Little White Cloud That Cried." On the portable Zenith my mother really couldn't afford, except that her latchkey children needed something warm to come home to after P.S. 69, there was **Ed**, chatting up *Margot Fonteyn* before she became a dame. As the following year he'd chat up *Audrey Hepburn*—before or after, I can't remember which, he laughed out loud when an Automat ate *Jackie Gleason*. How could he have been back there in California and right here in Queens? And around, too, later on with Elvis in 1956, when I was flunking Volleyball and puberty rites in high school? As, like the FBI, he'd find me wherever I went, in Cambridge, Berkeley, even Greenwich Village, chatting up *Buddy Holly, Ernie Kovacs, Noel Coward, Stevie Wonder, Sonny and Cher, Cassius Clay, Eskimos,* and *Beatles*. **Ed** was my first inkling that henceforth all of us everywhere would simultaneously experience everything that is shameful or heroic about our country on one big headset, as if, in a nomadic culture, the television screen were the windshield of our mobile home, and all America a motor lodge.

There were only three channels to turn to at the start, duking it out for the most desirable hour of the television week. **Ed**'s prime-time competition took the high road ("Philco TV Playhouse" and Steve Allen) and the low ("Bowling Stars" and "The Tab Hunter Show"). Jimmy Durante, Perry Como, Eddie Cantor, Bob Hope, and Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis, "The Adventures of Sir Francis Drake," "The Bill Dana Show," "Dragnet," "National Velvet," "Jamie McPheeters," "Broadside," "Buckskin," and "Wagon Train" came and went while **Ed** stayed put. James Garner in "Maverick" beat him two years running in the ratings, then collapsed from nervous exhaustion. Back in the days when corporations owned entertainers like trademarks or tropical fish—Arthur Godfrey belonged to Lipton tea, Milton Berle to Texaco, Bob Hope to Pepsodent, Dinah Shore to Chevrolet, and Jack Benny to Jell-O; Kraft, Lux, Revlon, G.E., Westinghouse, Magnavox, Budweiser, Armstrong Circle, and Johnson's Wax all had "Theaters"; Bell Telephone, Twentieth Century-Fox, and U.S. Steel had "Hours"; Philco, Schlitz, and Prudential had "Playhouses"; Geritol had an "Adventure Showcase," DuPont its "Show of the Week," Hallmark a "Hall of Fame," Toni Twin a "Time," Firestone a "Voice," and Pabst Blue Ribbon "Bouts"—Colgate

Palmolive spent fifty million dollars on a "Comedy Hour" to knock **Ed** out of his Lincoln-Mercury. But he won his time period every week until Colgate bought a slice of him itself.

Like Eddie Lopat, the crafty Yankees southpaw, **Sullivan** seemed to throw nothing but junk, and still they couldn't hit him. How did he do it, this spinning of the public like a plate?

They were making up television as they went along by accident and some sort of bat sonar, without focus groups, market surveys, "Q" ratings, or Betsy Frank at Saatchi & Saatchi. "A door closing, heard over the air," wrote E. B. White at television's dawn, "a face contorted seen in a panel of light, these will emerge as the real and true. And when we bang the door of our own cell or look into another's face, the impression will be of mere artifice."

Imagine at any moment in those prime-time years a six-room suite on the eleventh floor of Manhattan's Delmonico Hotel, where **Ed** and his wife, Sylvia, seem to have lived forever, with a Renoir landscape, a small Gauguin, autographed snaps of *Cardinal Spellman* and *Ella Fitzgerald*, and an original Disney cartoon in which **Ed** plays golf with *Donald Duck*. He gets up at 11:00 A.M.; breakfasts invariably on artificially sweetened pears, iced tea, and a room-service lamb chop; reads the papers; and makes hundreds of telephone calls, dialing them himself. He puts on one of his Dunhill suits—numbered, like his shirts and ties, so that he can tape a new introduction to an old rerun without looking as though he'd dropped in on his own program for a surprise visit from *Sirius*, the Dog Star—and a pair of buckled loafers. (His favorite shoes were a gift from *George Hamilton*, whose feet he once admired.) He lunches invariably between 3:30 and 4:00 P.M. at Gino's on Lexington Avenue on roast chicken, from which he detaches and pockets a drumstick, which he'll nibble later on. (From a childhood bout with scarlet fever and a high school football injury, he developed permanent sinus trouble; America's tastemaker can't smell or savor his food.) He hasn't a manager, an agent, a chauffeur for his limo or even a limo. He likes to talk to cabbies about his show and to Lincoln-Mercury dealers. On his way to the studio, he will carry his own change of clothes on a wire hanger in a garment bag. After a movie screening or a Broadway play, he'll supper with Sylvia at the Colony, Le Pavilion, or La Grenouille. They order sweet wine, which **Ed** improves with hoarded packets of Sweet'n Low. And then they are off to the Yonkers harness races and the frantic nightlife of the clubs.

We aren't talking about a Rupert Murdoch, a Michael Eisner, a Ted Turner, a Barry Diller, an Aaron Spelling, or any other morning star pedaling his epicycle in a Ptolemaic universe of hype according to which the very heavens buzz in eccentric orbits around the need of a vacuous public for gas. **Ed** is a regular guy. Except … he's made somehow of air.

Almost from their first date, at a heavyweight prizefight, **Ed** and Sylvia were self-sufficient, a mollusk of a marriage. They never ate in. Nobody cooked. The only domestic help they needed was the hotel maid. Isn't this odd? Not just the single chop for breakfast, the drumstick in the Dunhill pocket, the Sweet'n Low for wine, but this peculiar weightlessness, as if the Delmonico were an aquarium: artificial sweetening, artificial light. As in a Hollywood movie or a television action-adventure series or an experimental novel, nobody had to wash a dish or make a bed. Till she was twelve, their daughter, Betty, never ate with them; she ate at Child's with a paid companion. Days and nights always had this floating quality, like the dream life of athletes and gangsters, actors and comics, showgirls and sports, hustlers and swells; of songwriters, gagwriters, and ragtime piano players; of men who gambled and women who smoked; guys and dolls. **Ed** and Sylvia were children of the Roaring Jazz Age Twenties, that nervy postwar adrenaline-addicted Charleston state of mind confabulated in New York by admen, poets, and promoters and then nationally syndicated by Broadway columnists like Damon Runyon, Walter Winchell, Louis Sobol, and **Ed** himself—men who had gone to newspapers instead of college.

Newspapers and Broadway: Together, as **Ed** came of age, they were inventing twentieth-century American popular culture. Though vaudeville had been around since the 188Os, its heyday began on Broadway with the Olympia Theatre in 1895; the Victoria, the Loew's American, and the Palace in 1913; Ziegfeld Follies in 1915. Shubert Alley with all its legit theaters was just a couple of blocks from Tin Pan Alley in the Brill Building at Forty-ninth and Broadway, where pop music got composed and published. Nearby bloomed every variety of cabaret and lobster palace. To the north, Madison Square Garden and Fifty-second Street jazz clubs. To the south, the Metropolitan Opera and the garment district. In between, wigmakers, costume cutters, set designers, booking agents, and burlesque. And just a cab ride away for the afterhours thrill seeker, Harlem's Cotton Club. In this same neon-and-billboards Broadway entertainment zone, the new radio networks located themselves, the movie studios established New York offices, and television with its cumbersome machinery scrummaged for space. Mass communications, by trial and error, formed a mass taste. Whatever else might go on behind the shades of a Puritan-genteel New England, a Calvinist-Victorian heartland, a Pentecostal small-town South, or the desert-Western wastes—and probably a lot more did go on than anybody guessed, except the expatriate novelists—Broadway was the big time and the hot ticket, where they dreamed for us all those imperial-city dreams of license, celebrity, and scandal; of crossing race, class, and gender boundaries into the demimonde and the forbidden; a floating operetta; a rilly big shew.

Or so we were told by the columnists. Because the newspapers moved to Broadway too, and magazines like Vanity Fair, Smart Set, and The New Yorker. Broadway was invented by Variety, the show-biz daily, and by Runyons and Winchells who covered the theater, nightclubs, and crime waves the way they covered sports. The columnists all had been sportswriters, anyway, before they went to Broadway; they reported the neon night as if it were one big game, in a permanent present tense, with its own peculiar slanguage of ballpark lingo, stage idiom, underworld argot, immigrant English, fanspeak, black talk, promoter hype, and pastrami sandwich. That's about all they reported too. They certainly didn't report the political corruption and the racism that have always been the big city's biggest stories, not even the real estate swindles attending the construction of the IRT subway that brought those crowds to Times Square to begin with. What they wrote, in a Broadway Babel pastiche of "suckers," "lowdown," "scoop," and "who sez?," were press releases for a saloon society of singers like Caruso, fighters like Dempsey, and mobsters like Lansky, a fictitious twenties when the long legs of the chorus girls went on forever and all the gangsters were as cute as Gatsby.

*Ventriloquists and animals and marching bands, David Ben-Gurion, Brigitte Bardot, and the Singing Nun*

This was **Ed**'s grand, buoyant world—of the first book clubs, record charts, opinion polls, I.Q. tests, and birthcontrol clinics; a Waste Land with jumping beans—from 1922 at the New York Evening Mail to 1947, when he was discovered as a Daily News columnist who happened to be emceeing the annual Harvest Moon Ball, while a fledgling CBS just happened to be trying out its primitive cameras. Serendipity! Like show biz, sports, or war, like organized labor, organized crime, and organized religion, tabloid journalism had been an agency of upward mobility. But television would prove to be a trampoline … a flying carpet.

**Ed** was born, in 1901, in a Harlem that had been mostly Irish and Jewish but was changing fast when **Sullivan** abandoned it five years later for Port Chester, New York, on Long Island Sound. A twin brother, Danny, died at nine months. One thinks of Elvis and the stillborn Jessie. **Ed** always felt that if Danny had been around, nobody would have beat up on him. Perhaps Danny was the one who had been intended to sing songs, tell jokes, tease cats, and spin plates. Maybe **Ed** spent seventy-two years looking for him. This might also explain why, every Sunday night after the show was over, he always went to Danny's Hideaway.

His paternal grandfather fled County Cork in one of the nineteenth-century potato famines. **Ed**'s father, Peter, was the oldest son in a family of eight. He had gone to work instead of finishing high school and resented a patronage job at the customhouse.

**Ed**'s mother, Elizabeth, was an amateur painter and had a green thumb in the garden, when they finally got one. On the top floor of the two-family Port Chester frame house, in a parlor with velveteen-upholstered furniture, an upright piano, and an aspidistra, there was always music. Peter was partial to opera, especially Melba. Elizabeth loved John McCormack. And Port Chester was the sort of town in which an impresario of the democracies of performing talent should have grown up, a ragtime mix of Irish, Italians, Germans, and Jews with a factory and a railway station but also a village blacksmith and watering troughs for the horses bought from Gypsies to draw the carriages that went into the medicine shows with the snake-oil salesmen. A young **Ed** stood on the Boston Post Road and watched the Fierce-Arrows and the Packards chug their way to football games at Yale. He pumped the organ at Our Lady of Mercy for a nickel a mass. He caddied at the Apawamis Country Club in Rye for Nicholas Murray Butler, Columbia University's insufferable president. He lettered in four varsity sports at St. Mary's and ran away to Chicago at the age of fifteen. In Chicago the Marines wouldn't have him, so he returned to his parochial-school newspaper and wrote about sports instead.

*During Ed's career the popular arts devolved from something vital but dangerous to something consoling .*

Although an uncle offered to pay his way through college, the Port Chester Daily Item would pay him to go to games. Who wants more school when you can talk to Babe Ruth? From the ballpark he graduated to the police court and the undertaker's. From Port Chester he graduated to New York in 1922, to two-finger typing about college sports for the Evening Mail. On seventy-five dollars a week he lived over Duffy's Tavern, dated flappers, and bought himself a Durant to drive to Flushing for a round of golf each dawn, after Ruby Keeler closed the Silver Slipper. Having sent him to Florida for winter sports in 1924, the Mail promptly folded. He spent the next three years bouncing from Associated Press stringer to hotel PR man to the Ledger in Philadelphia to the World and Bulletin in New York; from the Leader, a socialist paper, to the Morning Telegraph, a racing paper. The Graphic, where Winchell invented the gossip column, hired him in 1927. Though sports editor **Ed** still cared more about fun and games than playacting, how he envied Winchell, the column syndicated in so many papers and the radio show across the nation, not just for the money but also for the inside hobnob and the mermaid splash. For four years they feuded, until Winchell was lured away by the Mirror, and Louis Sobol by the Journal-American. **Ed** was suddenly out of the locker room and onto the Great White Way—as a writer instead of a sport. In his first column in 1931, he attacked all the other gossip columnists for dishing dirt. But dishing dirt was the reason for a column, and almost immediately **Ed** himself was Winchell-izing:

“Jean Malin belted a heckler last night at one of the local clubs. All that twitters isn’t pansy.” The Graphic folded a year later. A week before it did, **Ed** was hired by the Daily News, where his “Little Old New York” column would appear for the rest of his life.

The rules for the column were: Lead With Your Scoop; Speed It Up; an Item for Everybody. The rules for CBS would become: Open Big; Keep It Clean; Stick In Something the Kids Will Like. In the lifetime of **Ed’s** career, the popular arts devolved from something vital but dangerous to something safe and consoling, until rock came along to rattle the cage. But on Sullivision there was to be no sex, not even cleavage, nor an unkind word about the people we were soon to meet. On television everyone was always wonderful. Even the chimps were wonderful. So was *Fidel Castro*. A genuine journalist would not have gone so innocently to Cuba in January 1959 and paid Castro to tell America, between a trained dog and *Alan King*, that “We are all Catholics! How could we be Communists?” Nor would even a checkbook journalist, on being told by Cardinal Spellman that he’d made a mistake, then renege on a promise to pay Fidel his ten-thousand-dollar fee. But **Ed** was an impresario, not a journalist. He sought to give the public what the public wanted. Almost alone among early television performers, he could hardly wait to consult his Trendex or, later, his Nielsens. If Elvis was socko on Steve Allen, **Ed** bought three of him. When an arrangement with the Metropolitan Opera cost him points, that was the end of opera on **Ed**. He had no personal use for rock and still less for the hysterical teens it drew to his theater, but for an audience he’d track down Belial in an ashram or an opium den. In doing so, he perfectly anticipated the market-research geeks who decided in 1971 that his day was done. But what a very long day it had been.

He had taken a pay cut, from $375 to $200 a week, to go to the Daily News. He scrambled off his beat to compensate, working double shifts on the short-lived radio interview programs for CBS and NBC, from a table at “21,” with sponsors like Adams Hats and American Safety Razor, introducing George M. Cohan, Irving Berlin, and Flo Ziegfeld, or onstage at the Paramount and Loew’s State Theaters as an emcee working five hour-long vaudeville shows a day. At Loew’s State he also emceed something called “Dawn Light Revue.” A glance at the typical program—Peg Leg Bates, the one-legged acrobat and tapper; Rita Rio, a singer “in the accepted hotcha fashion”; Dave Vine, “one of the most observant of Jewish dialect comics”—tells us all we need to know about where the television program came from, besides Port Chester. And when not on the stage at Loew’s State, he ran benefits and dance contests for the League of Catholic Charities, the B’nai B’rith, and a war-bond drive. At one such benefit, the 1947 Harvest Moon Ball, he was discovered, at the awkward age of forty-six, by the adman Mario Lewis.

It’s instructive, if not surprising, to note how many pioneers of early television, as of early radio, came directly out of advertising, just like the Jazz Age novelists: Pat Weaver, the father not only of Sigourney but of the “Today” and “Tonight” shows; Grant Tinker, who invented MTM; and the wonderful folks who gave us the quiz-show scandals, after which the networks took the programming away from the ad agencies. William S. Paley bought CBS to begin with, in 1928, because radio advertising had doubled his cigar-company sales. No other nation in the world had turned over its airwaves to advertisers, in a tidy-wrap package of mass production and mass persuasion. These men didn’t know exactly what to do with their new toy except to make it spin and sizzle so that the public would sit still staring at it long enough to be stupefied into desiring all the goodies a feverish market might disgorge. Like *Mickey Rooney* and *Judy Garland*, they wanted to put on a show in their garage. **Ed** already did so.

Except with critics and sponsors, his television show, “Toast of the Town” was a hit from its get-go on June 20, 1948. Nobody knew why, nor did anyone credit **Ed**. Emerson Radio hated him, and CBS shopped the show, with or without the host, to anybody who’d take it. (When, after three months, Emerson bailed out and Lincoln-Mercury took over, **Ed** was so grateful to the Ford Motor Company that he logged more than a quarter million miles in the next five years as its “ambassador,” landing on Boston Common in a chopper, floating down the Mississippi on a royal barge to the Memphis Cotton Festival. From Paris he sent picture postcards to every Ford dealer in the nation.) But that first Sunday, from that firetrap studio on Broadway, came the prototype for the next 1,087: *Dean Martin* and *Jerry Lewis,* headliners*; Rodgers* and *Hammerstein,* volunteer guests*; pianist Eugene List; ballerina Kathryn Lee; singing fireman John Kokoman; boxing ref Ruby Goldstein; Ray Bloch;* and *six of June Taylor’s neediest dancers,* calling themselves *Toastettes.*

As on every other Sunday to come, **Ed** had decided how many minutes each of them got at the morning dress rehearsal, after which one audience was chased out of the studio and another seated for the real thing. Over two decades much changed in the technical production of the hour: It was the first show with a permanent chorus line, the first to introduce celebrity guests from the audience, the first with overhead cams and rear-screen projection, the first to hit the road for remote telecasts, and the first to play with high-resolution cameras, a zoom lens, and videotape—but not in the dreaded rehearsal, which was **Ed**’s initial look at the lineup. As quick as his temper, so too was his judgment snappy. If a rehearsal audience didn’t laugh, a wise guy was gone, and the singer got an extra song. Add a mime; lose the hippo. **Ed** agreed with *George Arliss*: When crowds assemble together, “their mass instinct is perilously close to intelligence.” Public opinion, he said, “is the voice of God.” What’s amazing in retrospect is how seldom God, **Ed**, and the

mass intelligence missed the royal barge to Memphis. If Nat “King” Cole and Dinah Shore got booted off the show because they wanted to plug their new songs instead of singing **Ed**’s hit-parade favorites, well, *Pearl Bailey* rose from a sickbed fever of 103 degrees to perform, and *Alan King* could be counted on to fill any other sudden holes. King was so reliable he didn’t even have to rehearse, and he refused to appear on any program with a rock group.

Nothing pleased **Ed**’s critics. Fred Allen: “**Sullivan** will be a success as long as other people have talent.” Joe E. Lewis: “The only man who brightens up a room by leaving it.” Jack Paar: “NBC has its peacock, and CBS has its cuckoo. … Who else can bring to a simple English sentence such suspense and mystery and drama?” Even Alan King: “**Ed** does nothing, but he does it better than anyone else on television.” But when Fred Allen came back to shoot the wounded—"What does **Sullivan** do? He points at people. Rub meat on actors and dogs will do the same"—**Ed** was stung to reply, and did so tellingly: “Maybe Fred should rub some meat on a sponsor.”

So he looked funny. Even his best friends called him Rock of Ages, the Great Stone Face, the Cardiff Giant, Easter Island, and Toast of the Tomb. He had been, in fact, a handsome man before an auto accident in 1956 knocked out his teeth and staved in his ribs. In his early days he’d often been mistaken for Bogart. But after the crash there was always about him a shadowy wince, like Richard Nixon’s, or Jack Nicholson’s in the Batman movie, playing the Joker as Nixon. An ulcer didn’t help, despite which he drank and smoked. (Like his old enemy Runyon, he would die from cancer.) Nor did the belladonna he took in his dressing room help: While it expanded the duodenal canal, it also dilated the eyes. Later, hearing problems and arteriosclerosis accounted for some forgetfulness and those famous malapropisms. Introducing singer Dolores Gray: “Now starving on Broadway. …” Or forgetting **Sergio Franchi**’s name: “Let’s hear it for ‘Ave Maria'!” Mixing up Antipodes: “the fierce Maori tribe from New England. …” Right here in our audience: “The late Irving Berlin!” Once: “I’d like to prevent *Robert Merrill*.” On another occasion: “Let’s hear it reeelly big fer singer José Feliciano! He’s blind—and he’s Puerto Rican!”

Yet the public loved him, the stars showed up, and his critics couldn’t really attribute the success of his show to his column. Maybe, in the first few years, **Sullivan** did bully guests into appearing, as Winchell and Louella Parsons and Elsa Maxwell had bullied them onto their radio programs with the promise (or threat) of syndicated clout. But it quickly became obvious that appearing on television was more of a career maker than getting mentioned in any newspaper column. This was good news for CBS and bad news for print journalism.

And his success isn't so very complicated. He was the best producer of his era. Television is a producer's medium—as movies used to be a director's medium, before the bankers took over—which is why all the best writers for the medium, in order to have some control over their own material and some of the profit as well, turn into executive producers, whose names alone are all we see frozen on the screen after each episode of a series program like the sign of Zorro: "Steven Bochco." It is also why the writing so often declines in the second or third season of even the best series. The executive producer has gone off to dream up another pilot and to executive-produce another series. But all **Ed** cared about was Sunday night on CBS, forever, reinventing his show each new season for a tribe of ghostly millions. His other talent was the transparent kick he got out of it, as pleased to be exactly where he was as we'd have been. Like Upton Sinclair's Lanny Budd, Woody Allen's Zelig, or Tom Hanks's Gump, **Ed** made every crucial scene, and didn't put on airs about it. If he had to leave town, he brought back something he knew we'd like because he did: a bicycle, a puppet, a Blarney stone. From France, Edith Piaf. From Scandinavia, Sonja Henie. From Mexico, Cantinflas. From Italy, Gina Lollobrigida. From the moon, astronauts.

*Ed passed on Elvis first time around in 1955, at a loose-change price of $5,000. Then a terrible thing happened.*

There used to be more high culture on television because there was less television, and we would watch almost anything, and middlebrows like **Ed** felt they had some dues to pay. Besides, **Ed**'s father had loved grand opera and what the twenties had been about was a cross-pollinating of high arts and low: T. S. Eliot and Groucho Marx; Freud and Krazy Kat. Maybe as a byproduct of all those passionate nineteenth-century Italian tantrums, divas especially had the star quality prized by the celebrity culture **Ed** was helping create, even if he had to wait a few years for a Maria Callas to glamorize opera the way Arnold Palmer had glamorized golf. Certainly Roberta Peters, "the little Cinderella from the Bronx," was a terrific front-page story after her overnight triumph as Zerlina in Don Giovanni. As was *Itzhak Perlman*, whom **Ed** discovered on the streets of Tel Aviv. And Van Cliburn, the surprise American winner of a Moscow pianoplaying contest. And Rudolf Nureyev, just off the boat from the Evil Empire. Who will ever forget *Jan Peerce*, singing "Blue Bird of Happiness"? Or *Joan Sutherland*, onstage with *Tanya the Elephant*?

Like the Broadway theater, the Metropolitan Opera House was just a couple of blocks away. In the mid-fifties **Ed** entered into a hundred-thousand dollar deal with the Met's Rudolf Bing. **Ed** promised to devote eighteen minutes each to five different famous operas on five separate Sunday nights. The first such Sunday, November 26, 1956, the first of the operas was Tosca, with Callas making her television debut. This was **Ed**'s best shot, and it cost him six points off his Trendex average. The

second Sunday, January 27, 1957, with Dorothy Kirsten in Madama Butterfly, **Ed** actually lost his time period. Two equally matched imperial egos, **Sullivan** and Bing blamed each other for the fiasco. On March 10, the third Sunday, a desperate **Ed** cut La Bohème down to a four-minute duet by *Renata Tebaldi and Richard Tucker*. That was it for grand opera; *Elvis* had shown him another way. We hear a lot about what television's done to the attention span of the American public. We never hear anything about what the attention span of the American public has done to television.

Hollywood hated TV before TV moved there. It was **Ed**'s genius to convince a studio tin pot like Gold-wyn that television was free publicity, that clips of forthcoming films would entice millions to neighborhood theaters, that actors on **Ed**'s stage could promote their careers without dissipating their mystery. Beginning in 1951, long before the rich and famous had "lifestyles," there were "biographies" of them on **Ed**. When he decided as a ratings gimmick to devote whole programs to Bea Lillie, Cole Porter, Walt Disney, and Bert Lahr, he inadvertently invented the "spectacular," by which television graduated from vaudeville, radio, and Broadway into a humming ether all its own. The result was a steady stream of *Bogarts, Grables, Hepburns,* and *Pecks*, a *Liz Taylor*, and *John Wayne*. *Gloria Swanson* appeared to tell an astonished nation that she did too believe in God.

*He was one of us, not so special that we couldn't have been there too ourselves, hoofing with Gene Kelly.*

Such intimacy! Such presumption! But celebrity is what a democratic society has instead of aristocrats. We may feel today that we're no longer safe anywhere from the stars and starlets so ubiquitous on "Good Morning America," the "Today" show, Oprah, Joan, Geraldo, "Entertainment Tonight," "Live at Five," the late-night eyewitness news, and Letterman and Leno, who babble on forever about alcoholism, drug abuse, incest, and liposuction in the weeks before, during, and after their new films open for the skeptical inspection of teenaged mutant ninja mall mice. But back then it was magic in our living rooms, as if the gods had come down from their pink clouds, the generals from their white pedestals, and the vamps from our fantasies, to schmooze, giggle, and weep. And this same star-making machinery turned "unstar" **Ed** into an aristocrat himself. You will have noticed that TV news personalities like Edward R. Murrow, Walter Cronkite, and David Brinkley, from a synopsizing of the quotidian on our small screen, get heavier, taking on the gravity of what they report. Their faces become front pages, etchings of all they have seen. History thickens them to a density that exerts a mighty pull on our frayed attention. Through their images we are accustomed to trafficking with the momentous.

So it was for **Ed** too, case-hardened and at last secure in his celebrity, a glaze of so much pleasure rendered, so many heroes of the culture having been consorted with; an odd radiance of well-being; the kind of hum heard only in the higher spheres, as if he had levitated out of other people's talent into a gravity all his own. They sang hymns to him in Bye Bye Birdie, and almost made a movie of his life, and he did show up in the Hollywood version of "The Singing Nun." Not bad for a boy from Port Chester. But there was a difference too. **Ed** was not in his celebrityhood the least bit remote. He was one of us, not so special that we couldn't have been there too ourselves, singing along with *Birgit Nilsson,* hoofing with *Gene Kelly,* playing *Jack Benny*'s straight man. That's why we forgave him when he found himself suspended in midair by the illusionist *Richiardi*, or landing on the deck of an aircraft carrier in a helicopter, or riding around in a chariot on the Ben Hur set. If it could happen to **Ed**, it could happen to anybody. That spinning plate was a flying saucer; I saw you on television.

**Ed** could get any comic he wanted, from *Will Jordan* to *Mort Sahl*, stand-up or skit, *Wayne and Schuster* doing riffs on Shakespeare or *Phil Silvers* with a banana. They didn't have to adapt to a house style of humor; they weren't competing with their host, who wasn't a Milton Berle on Tuesday, a *Jackie Gleason* or *Sid Caesar* on Saturday. **Ed** was partial to the Catskills comics he'd grown up on, like *Henny Youngman* and *Jack E. Leonard,* and to impressionists, like *Jack Carter* and *Frank Gorshin*. His biggest favorites were *Stiller* and *Meara* (twenty-seven times), *Myron Cohen* and *Alan King* (thirty-nine each), and Wayne and Schuster (an astonishing sixty-seven appearances). We would have seen more of *Berle, Gleason,* and *Caesar,* of *Dean Martin* and *Jerry Lewis, Jack Benny, Bob Hope, Red Skelton, Jimmy Durante,* and *Ernie Kovacs* if they hadn't defected to their own variety shows, or of *Woody Allen* if he hadn't gone from writing for *Sid Caesar* to wanting to be *Ingmar Bergman*, and *Mort Sahl* if he hadn't gotten odd about the Kennedy assassination …

But they all had to audition in advance: up in the elevator at the Delmonico, into the Temple of Karnak. At home with a lamb chop, **Ed** insisted on hearing every word. As *Jackie Mason* proved, comics are dangerous. Mason was **Ed**'s featured comic that infamous evening in October 1964. They had been warned that LBJ would interrupt the show about halfway through, to say something about the war in Vietnam. They had expected him to be brief. He wasn't. And no one knew how long he'd go. By the time the show was back on "live," Jackie was in the middle of his monologue and already annoyed at having been placed last on a program where he had to compete with a President. **Ed** began a frantic series of hand signals: two minutes. The audience, ignoring Jackie's punch lines, found **Ed** funnier. So Jackie began making fun of **Ed**'s hand signals. This is when, according to **Ed**, Jackie gave him and

the audience that storied middle finger. Although the judge ruled later in Jackie's favor, **Ed**'s fury cost Mason $37,500 on a canceled contract. All the way back in 1964, Vietnam was already starting to ruin everybody else's fun.

A white man wrote "Blll Bailey, Won't You Please Come Home?" just as George Gershwin wrote the music of "Swanee" and Al JoIson sang it. Irving Berlin, who was Jewish, wrote both "White Christmas" and "Easter Parade." As well as a New York neighborhood, Tin Pan Alley was a wise-guy state of mind. Whatever you wanted, they'd write it: sentimental ballads, comical immigrant medleys, Broadway show tunes, ragtime, even "coon songs." They also wrote the score for **Ed's** home movie of an innocent and consensual America. Creepy to remember, but no singer appeared on his show as often as Connie Francis. Nor did we lack for *Bing Crosby, Dinah Shore, Perry Como, Rosemary Clooney, Gordon MacRae, Parti Page, Wayne Newton, Vikki Carr, Liberace,* and *Tiny Tim*. For the longest time even black entertainers like *Nat "King" Cole* and *Leslie Uggams* sounded as pink and squeaky clean as *Pat Boone*.

It wasn't exactly elevator music. *Ethel Merman* and *Pearl Bailey* could blast through the wax in our ears. What *Ella Fitzgerald* or *Sarah Vaughan* did to standards was what alchemists had tried and failed to do to base metals. When they weren't stopping the show, *Lena Home* and *Nina Simone* knew how to slow it down and make it think. But each appearance of a "mongrel" music, the distilled sound of an aggrieved subculture outside **Ed**'s Dream Palace, had a fugitive quality. When Nashville and Motown learned at last how to plug their own songs on radio, they'd do terrible things to *Tin Pan Alley*. Rock, of course, would take elevator music down to hell, and **Ed**'s show with it.

But without pop standards there would have been no show. They were more than the punctuation of the program; they were its sculptured space. Anything might happen, but someone always sang. And what got sung was the latest hit. **Ed** was about hits, and to make sure he had an uninterrupted flow of them, he had entered into a mutual-assistance pact with Tin Pan Alley that amounted to a codependency. He needed the top ten. And by appearing on his show, you stayed in the top ten, the way a book on The New York Times bestseller list will sell enough copies to remain there for months; it must be good. Besides, showing up twice a year on **Ed** guaranteed a singer year-round club dates, plus constant play on the radio and jukebox.

This was less hanky-panky than a synergetic shakedown of mass-communications conglomerates. (If you need hanky-panky, look to CBS Records, with whom **Ed** had a cozy deal, which is why we heard so much *My Fair Lady* and so little *Frank Sinatra*, who belonged to Capitol.) As if to signify this codependence, **Ed** ordered fancy sets built

for every singing act, and no set was ever used a second time. In other words, music video. But you had to go live and couldn't lipsynch. Because *Mary Tyler Moore* insisted on synching, she was banished from the show, a sort of premature Milli Vanilli.

Well then, rock. **Ed** passed on *Elvis* the first time around in 1955, at a loose-change price of five thousand dollars. In July 1956, however, a terrible thing happened to **Ed** on his way to the Trendex ratings. Elvis appeared on Steve Allen's brand-new Sunday show directly opposite **Ed**. The Monday news was **Ed**, 14.8; Elvis, 20.2. To reporters calling for his reaction **Ed** said, "I don't think Elvis Presley is fit for family viewing." But that afternoon he was on the phone to Tom Parker, striking a fifty-thousand-dollar deal for three spots.

And contrary to what you think you remember, when Elvis showed up for the first of these, in September, we saw all of him. Having been burned in effigy in St. Louis, hanged in effigy in Nashville, and banned, at least his lower body parts, in the state of Florida, the full-frontal Elvis didn't seem so awfully shocking. It was the second Elvis appearance that got shot only from the waist up, because producer Mario Lewis had heard a rumor that a playful Elvis had taken to hanging a soda-pop bottle in the crotch of his trousers. **Ed** actually decided to like Elvis after a press conference in which a reporter asked if he was embarrassed when "silly little girls" kissed his white Cadillac. The King replied: "Well, ma'am, if it hadn't been for what you call those silly little girls I wouldn't have that white Cadillac." Like Trendex, this was something **Ed** could appreciate.

But did any of us appreciate what else was going on? With an Elvis, **Ed** had not only opened the gates to the ravening chimeras and barbaric hordes of rock; he had also unlocked the doors to the attic, the bedroom, and the basement of the Ike culture. After a long sedation all that sexual energy seemed to explode. It may have been acceptable to cross-pollinate the races and classes in Times Square. It was something else again when long-haired, poor, white Southern trash insinuated a rockabilly/ hubcap-outlaw variant of R&B and "dirty dancing" into the ears, hearts, and glands of the Wonder-bread children of a bored and horny suburban middle class. What Elvis meant, along with Kerouac, Ginsberg, and the motormouth beats, was that the sixties were coming, an animal act that rattled everybody's cage and couldn't be contained on any consensus television program that doled out equal time to competing but acceptable subcultures in a median range of American taste. Some chairs were going to be broken, some categories, some heads, and some hearts.

By the time rock got to **Sullivan**, the world was changing, and so was television, and not, so far as he could see, exactly for the better. He loved Motown, especially the *Supremes*, in whom he seemed to have found a

dreamy mix of gospel and Tin Pan Alley. Rock, he merely put up with. Even the *Dave Clark Five* (fifteen appearances) was no threat to Pearl Bailey (twenty-three), *Teresa Brewer* (twenty-seven), or, impossibly, *Roberta Peters* (forty). As for the *Beatles*, they were cute kids, if only they'd left their deranged teenyboppers back in Liverpool. The story goes that late in 1963 **Ed** and Sylvia, wandering through Heathrow Airport, ran into forty thousand screaming nymphets. What was up? "Beatles," an airline employee said. **Ed**: "Well, can't you get some spray?" But as The New York Times once explained, "Whatever Lolita wants, **Sullivan** gets." That Christmas he agreed with Brian Epstein on three shows at four thousand dollars each. The rest was more compelling as pop history than as network television. In oddly Edwardian suits, with freshly laundered mop tops, on their very best behavior, the Beatles were looked at by seventy-four million Americans in a single squat. What frightened **Ed** were the shrieking groupies, including, in his own studio, the daughters of Leonard Bernstein and Jack Paar. After the Beatles he refused to let anybody into the theater under the age of eighteen without a parent or guardian. Which didn't keep fans of the Stones from pushing *Mick Jagger* through a plate-glass window in 1967 or *The Doors* from misbehaving after they had promised not to. (Told they'd never appear again on the show, *Jim Morrison* said: "Hey, man, we just worked the **Sullivan** show. Once a philosopher, twice a pervert.")

The worst sign of an approaching apocalypse was when *Herman's Hermits* came to town. A high school student hung around backstage with a borrowed press pass and then left by the stage door, where he was mistaken for a Hermit. The mob tore at his clothes. Fighting free into street traffic, he was killed by a passing car. To have died for Herman's Hermits—What was wrong with these people that they couldn't behave themselves while **Ed** was preventing *Robert Merrill*?

What was wrong was that his audience, in the studio and at home, had gone to civil war. Not only did parents and their children watch different TV programs on different sets in different rooms of a house divided, but these children seemed to live on different planets with alternative gravities, under bloody moons like Selma and Saigon. Pop music was no longer edifying, and not even harmless. For every Woodstock there seemed, alas, an Altamont. Children of **Ed Sullivan**, flower-smoking media Apaches like Abbie Hoffman (a revolutionary Dennis the Menace who said that he'd prefer to overthrow the U.S. government by means of bubble gum "but I'm beginning to have my doubts") and Jerry Rubin (the poisoned Twinkie who announced, "Sirhan Sirhan is a Yippie!"), took over campuses and parks, the Stock Exchange and evening news. No wonder **Ed** looked tired, even sullen, toward the end. Where was the coherence?

*By the time rock got to Sullivan, the world was changing, and not, so far as he could see, exactly for the better.*

*Elvis,* the *Beatles,* and *The Doors* signified the confusion to come of politics and culture. The juvenile delinquents had their own tribal music, and it wasn't "Sentimental Journey." Rock was political—and hair, and sex; even whales. This confusion perceived itself to be in a profound opposition to a tone-deaf, anal-retentive, body-bag establishment. To a child of the sixties, **Ed's** last decade, they had the guns and we had the guitars. If the seventies belonged so depressingly to disco, just waiting for the eighties were metal-heads and punks, shape changers and androgynous shamans who would scrawl graffiti and sometimes swastikas all over the walls of the malls. Rap and hip-hop would tell us things about the mythical America that Tin Pan Alley had done its best to cover up. By the end of the eighties, no less than Harvard University would publish a book on the Sex Pistols. We each listen now to our own musics, on wavelengths designer-coded for age, color, class, sex, and sneer, through Sony Walkman headsets, on skateboards, Rollerblades, and Harleys—when we aren't tuned in to hate radio. Do we miss **Ed** and his consensus? Sure we do, like Captain Kangaroo and Ferdinand the Bull and the Great Pumpkin and all the other imaginary friends of our vanished childhood.

**Ed** was a democrat and a fan. From Harlem, Port Chester, and Broadway, from the ballpark, the saloon, and the tabloid, all he cared about was talent, no matter what it looked like, where it came from, or how he pronounced it. Forget the feuds with *Arthur Godfrey, Frank Sinatra, Jack Paar, Steve Allen,* even *Walter Winchell*. What we saw on his screen was an encompassing, the peculiar sanction of the democratic culture. By being better at what he did than everyone else who did it, however odd or exotic, anyone could achieve his show, but nobody inherited the right. **Ed**'s emblematic role was to confirm, validate, and legitimize singularity, for so long as the culture knew what it wanted and valued and as long as its taste was coherent.

During the Cold War he was absolutely typical. When the blacklist hit the entertainment industry, he was as craven as the times and as his own network. (At CBS the Ed Murrows were few and far between. The network fired Joseph Papp as a stage manager because he refused to talk about his friends to a congressional committee.) Throughout a disgraceful blacklist period **Ed** submitted performers' names for vetting to the crackpot Theodore Kirkpatrick, editor of Counterattack and author of Red Channels: The Report of Communist Influence in Radio and Television, a report slandering half the entertainment industry, from Leonard Bernstein and Aaron Copland to John Garfield, Uta Hagen, Lena Home, Burl Ives, Zero Mostel, Dorothy Parker, Howard K. Smith, and Orson Welles.

But then there was the other American obsession, race. At *Harry Belafonte*, **Ed** drew the line against the blacklist. From his earliest

newspaper days **Ed** had been a brother. In his column he attacked New York University for agreeing to keep its one black basketball player on the bench in a game against the University of Georgia. When his friend Bojangles Robinson died, he paid anonymously for a funeral at the Abyssinian Baptist Church and organized a parade afterward to the Evergreen Cemetery in Brooklyn with an all-star cast of foot soldiers that included Berle, Merman, Durante, Danny Kaye, and W. C. Handy. When Walter Winchell savaged Josephine Baker, who had been refused service at his favorite Stork Club watering hole, **Ed** declared a war on the Mirror columnist that didn't end till a memorable night in 1952 at that same club, when **Ed** hustled Winchell into the men's room, pushed his head down a urinal, and flushed him—as if to signify and celebrate the triumph of television over Hearst. And obliging though he had always been to his sponsor, **Ed** was contemptuous of those Ford dealers in the South who objected to his hugging of *Ella Fitzgerald* on camera, his kissing of *Diana Ross* and *Pearl Bailey*. With *Louis Armstrong*, he'd go anywhere in the world: Guantánamo, Spoleto. From *Duke Ellington* to *Ethel Waters* there wasn't an important black artist who didn't appear on **Ed**'s show, just like famous white folks.

But as television expanded, the culture fell apart. It was as if the magic once so concentrated in a handful of choices had managed somehow to dissipate itself, like an expanding universe after the Big Bang, into chaos, heat death, and fractals. By the end of the sixties there were twenty variety shows on TV and that wasn't counting the bloody circus of Chicago in 1968, the porn movies from Vietnam, and Götterdämmerung in Watts. Instead of Irving Berlin, Joan Baez; instead of Broadway, Newark. None of this was **Ed**'s fault. For more than two decades not only had he kept the faith, but he had every week renewed it, telling us what was funny, who was important, and how we were supposed to feel about the world he monitored on our behalf. But that world had detonated, concussing even our own homes, where we went in separate furious sects to separate electric altars, alien dreamscapes, and bloody creep shows.

Where's the coherence, much less the consensus, when the people who watch "The X-Files" on Fox and the people who watch ice hockey on Sports Channel and the people who watch the "Lehrer News Hour" on PBS don't even speak to the people who watch Guns 'n Roses on MTV? Of the nation's 95.4 million TV households, 70 percent have more than one set and 11 percent have four or more. Who needs **Ed** when we can become famous for nothing more compelling than having already been on television? How amazing that such a show ever existed at all: such innocent bonds, such agreeable community, so much Broadway, Tin Pan Alley, and Port Chester.

Sometimes late at night, in the rinse cycle of sitcom reruns, cross-torching evangelicals, holistic chiropodists, yak-show yogis, and gay-porn cable, surfing the infomercials, I think there must be millions like me out there, trying to bring back **Ed**, as if by switching channels fast enough in a pre-Oedipal blur, we hope to reenact some Neolithic origin myth and from the death of this primeval giant, our father and our Fisher King, water with blood a bountiful harvest and civility.

*John Leonard is the television critic for New York magazine. This essay was adapted from Smoke and Mirrors: Violence, Television and Other American Cultures, just published by the New Press.*