



“I Love Lucy”

Before television became this country’s most popular cultural medium, radio(1) was providing entertainment to most people in this country. Families would gather around the living room radio set in the evening, listening to their favorite broadcasts. One of those programs was a comedy called *My Favorite Husband*(2), starring Lucille Ball. In it, the future Queen of Comedy played a zany housewife with a tendency to get into trouble. That radio show would later become the basis for the most popular television show of all time: *“I Love Lucy”*.

From October 15, 1951, through May 6, 1957, *“I Love Lucy”* was filmed in front of a live studio audience in Hollywood. At that time there were only about 15 million TV sets in U.S. homes (compared to about 250 million today) – and that show was the first to be watched in more than 10 million of those homes. *“I Love Lucy”* became almost an overnight success. In total, 181 episodes (including the pilot and a Christmas special that reprised previous episodes) were made. More than 50 years later, the show has never been off the air! *“I Love Lucy”* has been shown in 77 countries, in 22 languages, and is reported to be playing somewhere in the world every minute of every day. It is number two on *TV Guide*’s(3) “top 50 shows of all time.”



“I Love Lucy” was one of the first of the type of television program called a situation comedy or “sitcom”(8). Its rapid and widespread popularity had some interesting repercussions. In those days, large department stores across the country were usually

open on Monday evenings. However, many of them changed their evening hours to another night, because too many of their customers were staying home to watch “*I Love Lucy*”! The show aired from 9:00-9:30, resulting in parent-teacher organizations demanding that the network change the show to an earlier time so that children would not have to stay up past their bedtimes to watch it. According to telephone company records, fewer calls were made across the country during the show’s airtime. More people watched the episode about the birth of the couple’s TV son than watched either the inauguration of President Eisenhower or the coronation of Queen Elizabeth that same year.

Ironically, when CBS⁽⁶⁾ first approached Lucille Ball to bring her popular radio show to television, the network was not willing to accept her stipulation that Desi, her real-life husband, play her husband on the show; they did not think that the country would accept a marriage between Lucy and a Hispanic⁽⁵⁾. To prove them wrong, Lucy and Desi created a vaudeville act. (Vaudeville was live theater that consisted of a number of individual performances by comedians, singers, dancers, acrobats, and magicians.) After the terrifically positive response they received in their six months tour, CBS conceded, accepted Desi, and Philip Morris⁽⁴⁾ was brought on as the show’s sponsor.



In addition to his acting talents, Desi Arnaz brought several innovations to “*I Love Lucy*” that contributed greatly to the new medium of television. Most early television was broadcast live from New York City to people in the eastern part of the country. People in the West saw kinescopes – something like an inferior quality videotape – of programs. Because Desi decided that the show would be filmed in front of a live audience, using three cameras⁽⁹⁾, he was actually the creator of the rerun. Many of the techniques used on “*I Love Lucy*” are still in use today.

Lucy and Desi formed Desilu Studios⁽⁷⁾ as their production company. That company grew from twelve to 800 employees in the six years “*I Love Lucy*” was on the air. Desilu was responsible for this show that was the highest rated series on TV for four out of its six seasons. Later, Desilu Studios produced *The Untouchables*, *Mission Impossible*, and *Star Trek*.



Desi's talents both behind and in front of the camera teamed with Lucy's comedic genius produced an unbeatable combination. Lucy was a master of physical comedy⁽¹⁰⁾. She was a perfectionist in working with props and would rehearse her scenes endlessly until she felt they were perfect. She had an incredibly expressive face, and some of her facial expressions⁽¹¹⁾ became so recognizable that they were even given names by the scriptwriters.



Only five writers were responsible for all the "*I Love Lucy*" episodes. Madelyn Pugh⁽¹²⁾ and Bob Carroll, Jr⁽¹²⁾ wrote every script. Initially, the show's creator and producer Jess Oppenheimer⁽¹³⁾ wrote with them, and later Bob Schiller⁽¹²⁾ and Bob Weiskopf⁽¹²⁾ were added to the writing team. Lucy always credited the writers with being the key factor in the show's success. Cinematographer Karl Freund⁽¹⁴⁾ and film editor Dann Cahn⁽¹⁴⁾ were also significant contributors.

Vivian Vance⁽¹⁵⁾ and William Frawley⁽¹⁶⁾ were the actors who played Lucy and Desi's best friends on the show. Ethel and Fred Mertz. Their acting talents, combined with the stars of the show, produced an ensemble cast that many believe is unrivaled.



In addition to the comedy that the show provided, it was responsible for cultural contributions⁽¹⁷⁾ as well. For the first time on television, audiences were able to experience Latin culture and music⁽¹⁸⁾ through Desi Arnaz's character, storyline and performing. Also, the newly emerging battle of the sexes⁽¹⁹⁾ was evident almost every week, as Lucy and her pal Ethel (Vivian Vance) tried to outwit their television husbands. Lucy portrayed a frustrated housewife, humorously rebelling against her domestic life.



The show reflected many changes occurring in this country during the 1950's⁽²⁰⁾. When the show began, even a married couple had to be shown as having separate beds, the word “pregnant” could not be used on television, and there was no sign of inter-ethnic marriages or relationships.

In the 1950s, the nation's economy was recovering from World War II, and the show portrayed this change as the Ricardos moved to a larger apartment and then to the suburbs. One of the series's storylines reflected the country's obsession with Hollywood, with the Ricardos and Mertzes living in California while Ricky filmed a movie. Many film stars of the day appeared in those episodes, including John Wayne, William Holden, and Harpo Marx⁽²¹⁾. Famous guest stars in other seasons included Ernie Ford, Charles Boyer, Orson Welles, Bob Hope⁽²¹⁾ and Superman⁽²²⁾



In its relatively brief run, “*I Love Lucy*” established itself as one of the greatest TV shows of all time. It has been enjoyed in reruns for more than 50 years. Its characters are remembered and revered, and it continues to make audiences laugh. As Desi Arnaz said, “*I Love Lucy*’ wasn’t slick or cerebral – it never insulted anybody. It had one mission –

to make people laugh honestly.” And if you ask any one of its five decades of fans, it certainly has lived up to that mission.

For further study:

1. History of the radio broadcast industry
2. *My Favorite Husband* radio show, 1948-1951 – characters, story line, commercials, cost, etc.
3. *TV Guide* magazine covers/U.S. pop culture
4. The beginnings of TV advertising/sponsors/the cigarette industry
5. Hispanics/Latinos in the entertainment industry, 1950-present
6. Development of the CBS television network
7. Success of Desilu Studios, programs they produced
8. History and development of sitcoms from “*I Love Lucy*” to present
9. Television production methods
10. Physical comedy – what it is, by Lucy, and other famous physical comedians
11. Lucy’s famous facial expressions (may involve drawing!)
12. The main scriptwriters of the show/their careers and experiences on the show/what’s involved in being a comedy writer
13. Jess Oppenheimer’s experiences as the show’s original creator and producer/what’s involved in being a comedy producer
14. Karl Freund’s and Dann Cahn’s careers and experiences on the show/what’s involved in being a cinematographer or film editor
15. The life and career of Vivian Vance
16. The life and career of William Frawley
17. Discuss how the show contributed to the culture of our country
18. Explain how Latin culture and music have influenced the culture of our country
19. Define the “battle of the sexes” and discuss how it relates to the show
20. The 1950’s was a time of great cultural change in the US. Discuss.
21. Entertainment stars of the 1950’s.
22. Trace the history and development of the Superman character from its creation to the present.