Gerald Nachman is a shining gem." —Dick Cavett ere Our Stage onight Ed Sullivan's America

## Gerald Nachman

## Right Here on Stage Tonight

Ed Sullivan's America

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In memory of Marshall Jacobs and Ray Golden, two talented lovers of talent Ed... is so aware of talent—so struck with the splendor of it—so altogether stage struck, in the true sense of the phrase, that one can actually *feel* it.

Helen Hayes in *Collier's*, 1956

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## **Theme Music**

You can tell a lot about a people by how they choose to amuse themselves. "The Ed Sullivan Show," for millions of otherwise culturally deprived Americans, was the prime source of pure entertainment, television's most powerful, influential show for 23 years, between 1948 and 1971.

Popular culture is a quick, reliable barometer of the national spirit at a moment in time, and for nearly a quarter century "The Ed Sullivan Show"—and Sullivan himself—produced and nurtured America's cultural life. Not just pop culture but haute culture, art with a capital A. The hot, the new, the old and cold, the classic, the fleeting, the frivolous, the serious, the bizarre—all of it came tumbling out of Ed Sullivan's flickering tube of plenty each Sunday night. This is a biography of that show and, to an extent, the man who made it happen, which is to say a memoir of pop culture in mid-20th-century America.

Ed and I share a fuzzy history. The first review I ever wrote, in 1953, was of "The Ed Sullivan Show"—or "Toast of the Town," as it was then called. I was 15 years old and wrote the review, for myself, in my bedroom on a secondhand Underwood typewriter. I gave the show a mixed notice, my debut as an entertainment critic.

I gradually settled into watching Ed Sullivan, Milton Berle, "Masquerade Party," Arthur Godfrey, Hopalong Cassidy, "Martin Kane, Private Eye," and "What's My Line?"—gray images cast on our neighbors' seven-inch porthole screen. My father, a community theater actor, refused at first to buy a TV set. He eventually relented and purchased

one—a massive Packard-Bell console encased in walnut—in 1953, when I was in high school, mainly to watch dramatic series with original plays such as "Playhouse 90," "Studio One," "The Hallmark Hall of Fame," and "The Kraft Television Theater." On Sunday nights, while nibbling cold cuts off spindly wooden TV tables in our new knotty-pine den, we, like most 1950s families, watched "Toast of the Town."

Seven years later, in my senior year of college, I was hired to write about television three days a week for the *San Jose Mercury-News*. Having watched TV so rarely in college that I had to rent a TV set, at three dollars a week, in order to write my reviews, I was clearly well qualified for the position. My first review was of, yes, "The Ed Sullivan Show," a fat, sitting duck for young smart-ass critics. Hoping to make an impression as a witty fellow, I packed the review with wisecracks; naturally, I kidded the dog acts and jugglers and mocked the host's garbled introductions. When I was hired full-time by the paper in 1960, TV was still so new and insignificant that the job of reviewing shows could be dumped on a 22-year-old kid who didn't own a TV set and had reviewed nothing professionally. Most newspapers in 1960 didn't even have their own TV critics, satisfied to dismiss television with cursory wire service reviews.

When I first glimpsed Sullivan's show in 1948, I was ten years old. That was the year network television expanded to fill up the evening TV log and our quiet nights, and the year that "Toast of the Town" debuted. Only a year earlier, TV had been a true wasteland, with clowns, puppets, and local cooking shows popping up willy-nilly; between shows, a blank window tried out test patterns on us. Most stations said good night by 10:30.

So, although television, Ed Sullivan, and my TV-viewing life all started out together, in 1948 I was still deeply immersed in radio, watching TV haphazardly and never at my house. TV struck me as a mechanical gimmick, a cousin of wire recorders and home movie projectors, then also in vogue. Television was something you watched at other people's houses. My main escape route was still comic books. "Superman," "Captain Marvel," "Batman," "Little Lulu," and "Archie" enticed me far more than old Johnny Mack Brown westerns, fake wrestling matches, Roller Derby marathons, and nitwit game shows.

Early TV was a drowsy, timid, inept, primitive giant that few took seriously or grasped, until it stirred from its sleepy infancy and turned, within ten years, into the crazed, ravenous, out-of-control, lumbering beast we know today. What nobody realized at the time is that we were

witnessing the start of a mighty, mind-altering medium. That grainy herky-jerky gizmo reinvented show business and gobbled up most of popular culture not nailed down.

Television began life in a defensive crouch, sneered at and snubbed by the movie industry, ignored and insulted on radio, whose headliners—Fred Allen, Henry Morgan, Bob Hope, Jack Benny—regularly slandered television. Privately, however, movie and radio moguls fretted that TV would destroy them. Movie magazines regarded TV personalities as tacky, tainted figures. A kind of telephobia infected Hollywood; television then was beamed mainly from New York. Once America began watching TV in serious numbers, and movies played to half-full houses, frantic theater owners had to begin bribing people to show up by offering free dinnerware. Radio countered with giveaway shows—"Break the Bank," "Queen for a Day," "Stop the Music"—sending listeners to their phones to compete for hefty prize money.

Nobody in America in 1948—not the networks, agents, advertisers, or performers—foresaw television's rapid development, greedy grasp, and influence. But they caught on fast. In 1948, when "Toast of the Town" began, the entertainment industry was a conservative, autocratic enterprise. Radio had settled into a cozy habit, like reading the funny papers and nestling into the neighborhood movie house. Television changed all that forever, with "The Ed Sullivan Show" steering much of the change.

Once television moved west to take advantage of slick movie technology and a new talent pool, TV became a film industry subsidiary, where it stands (or squats) today. What gave TV its original literary and theatrical flavor, its creative flair, brisk pace, and high-risk crackling energy, was its gritty New York-ness. In Hollywood, gloss soon trumped grit. Within a very few years, TV had slid from "Requiem for a Heavyweight," "Days of Wine and Roses," and "12 Angry Men" to "The Beverly Hill-billies," "Mister Ed," and "The Donna Reed Show." While much early TV was drivel, much was also exciting, and Ed Sullivan's show was a major reason for that early tingle.

My main memory of the show was not of Elvis, the Beatles, Señor Wences, or Topo Gigio. It was, rather, of beholding the aging vaude-villians Ed Sullivan doted on, as did my father, but who had been only billboard names to me: Maurice Chevalier, Sophie Tucker, Ted Lewis, Joe Frisco, Harry Richman, Blossom Seeley, Fanny Brice, George Jessel. They had all been on radio, but now seemed magnified many times in

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vivid black-and-white flesh on the Sullivan show, granted renewed theatrical lives on a weekly national stage where they could strut their stuff for the next generation—mine.

Sullivan's show was where most Americans—like the notorious baby boomers—got their rudimentary education about pop culture and the finer arts, past and present. Today, there is no commercial TV showcase even remotely similar that exists solely for the arts, pop and otherwise, as Sullivan's show did. Even the early bright hope of cable TV—the Bravo and Arts & Entertainment channels—soon dimmed, both networks reduced to airing mainly movie and TV reruns.

Sullivan's show was something beyond even what it first envisioned for itself: it became the great equalizer, relentlessly democratic, cutting across all age, class, cultural, and ethnic boundaries—elitist one moment (a Helen Hayes dramatic reading) and lowbrow the next (performing poodles), now ethnic (Harry Belafonte) and now white bread (Kate Smith). Sullivan drew no distinction between Bible readings and juggling seals. The show appealed to Republicans, Democrats, and Independents, everyone from taxi drivers to tycoons.

On a normal Sunday night in 1955, the show drew 47 million viewers (the "American Idol" finale attracted 35 million viewers in 2008, when America had about twice as many people as it did in 1955. "What's right about 'American Idol,'" said *New York Times* critic Stephen Holden in 2008, "is the way it holds up a mirror to American mass culture. Not since the heyday of Ed Sullivan has a variety show cast such a wide net." But there's a major difference between the two: "American Idol" is not a real variety show, nor does it claim to be; but it's the closest we have to one.

Ed Sullivan, a middlebrow with highbrow pretensions, revered the fine arts, though only from afar (like most of his audience), but he knew it was good for us. Without him, many Americans might never have seen or heard Andrés Segovia, Margot Fonteyn, or Maria Callas. Even if you never saw another ballet or heard another aria, you understood the basics and knew what you were missing. And if you happened to love what you saw, you were transfixed, transported, transformed—and on your way. Unwittingly, Sullivan broke ripe, fertile ground for public broadcasting.

Even when we beheld a Chinese guy twirling platters on bamboo sticks, we knew he was the best twirler money could buy. Sullivan was driven to present the greatest performers in the world. He revered talent,

any talent, maybe because he had none himself. But he longed to be on a stage, even if it meant standing at the far edge, basking in the talent of a grand opera singer or a petite Polish tumbler.

Through pure dogged ambition, Sullivan survived his own stage incompetence, vile attacks by critics, and the disapproval of grammarians everywhere. His mangled introductions became the stuff of legend: "How about a hand for Jose Feliciano—he's not only blind, he's also Puerto Rican!," "Out in our audience tonight is Dolores Grey, now starving on Broadway!," "Let's really hear it for 'The Lord's Prayer'!" Unlike most TV performer-hosts, Sullivan had no agenda, but how he did quiver at the sound of clapping hands!

The show was campy even in its own time, all of it keenly captured by mimic Will Jordan in his early-1950s record parody, "The Roast of the Town." When Jordan's Ed Sullivan announced, "Next week, on our stage—17,000 Polish dentists . . . drilling!," it didn't seem all that preposterous. Ed was awed by precision and, thus, all drill teams. He also had a lustful eye for the rare and exotic—leaping Russian dancers, a 12-year-old Israeli violin prodigy (Itzhak Perlman)—as well as for the curious or innocuous: a singing nun from Belgium, a guy who read sentences backward. And he stood at attention for all theatrical patriotic salutes—the West Point Glee Club, singing Irish cops, a Marine drill squad, prancing horses.

"When we have a real hero like this," he explained after introducing a fireman who had pulled two children from a burning building, and who was part of a band of bagpipers, "risking his life to save little children, people should be told. It's good for firemen, and it's good for America." A waiter at Danny's Hideaway in New York City, Sullivan's favorite retreat, once verified Ed's Americanism: "He's a right guy, Ed. He's America. He will never be destroyed. The way I feel about my country is the way I feel about Ed." Or in the words of Martha Weinman Lear, in a 1968 Life magazine piece, "Ed Sullivan, although he lives light-years away from where the grass roots grow, reflects exquisitely the best and worst of the national character."

By "worst," she was likely hinting at Sullivan's emotional pleas, his nationalistic fervor, his love of American apple-pie sentiments—respect your elders, help thy neighbor, buy war bonds—but Ed was hardly alone. He lived in a time of the kind of solid, unquestioned values still yearned for today by many and loudly trumpeted across red-state America. Despite all the social, political, and cultural upheaval since the show left the air in 1971, millions of folks *still* reside, steadfastly and terminally, in Ed

Sullivan's America. And dammit, many want it back, a time and place where seldom was heard a discouraging word—about abortions, homosexuals, drugs, and classroom prayers.

Sullivan's show became, apart from unquestioned entertainment, both a prism and a promoter of traditional American values of the 1950s and 1960s. While the show featured an astonishing 10,000 acts, it is now, alas, mainly remembered for four or five momentous events: for Elvis Presley in his first national TV exposure (which it wasn't); for the Beatles, in their first dynamic American TV appearances; and for two of its most beloved recurring novelty acts—Topo Gigio, the artificially sweetened mouse-puppet that signed off in a weentsy Italian accent ("Kees-a-me goo' night, Eddie!"), and an even stranger Spanish ventriloquist, Señor Wences, who spoke through a mouth scrawled in red lipstick on his fist and through a wooden head in a box. And finally, to be sure, for Ed Sullivan himself, in all of his eventually endearing onscreen ineptitude. As author David McCullough said of Teddy Roosevelt, "They came to love him for the very things they had laughed at him for earlier."

The show's towering 23-year layer cake of entertainment provided career opportunities for performers, who had seven minutes to captivate the country. This book explores the transcendent Sullivan experience through the eyes of some 75 performers—famous, infamous, and long forgotten—who appeared on the show. Some artists became like relatives in our homes: Roberta Peters (41 appearances), Jerry Stiller and Anne Meara (36), the McGuire Sisters (22). But many had only one chance at fame, and saw it snatched away at the last minute—performers like Lou Alexander and Larry Wilde, and the team of Charley Brill and Mitzi McCall, which was flattened by the hoopla surrounding the first Beatles show. For some, the Sullivan show meant fame, posterity, and a golden annuity. For many, though, it was a fast exit back onto Broadway and West 53rd Street.

They were all part of what was, undeniably, the authentic "greatest show on earth." If Ringling Bros. Circus could lay claim to that title, what did this make "The Ed Sullivan Show," which swallowed entire circuses and spat out their prize acts each week? Pre-Sullivan, being the toast of the town meant playing New York's Palace Theatre; but Sullivan's "Toast of the Town" dwarfed every vaudeville palace. Performers reached virtually all of America in an instant. As Joan Rivers said, "Johnny Carson gave you the cities. Ed Sullivan gave you the country."

Before the rock revolution declared war on traditional pre-1960s pop culture, Sullivan's show was the gold standard for what mattered in show business. Ed was the gatekeeper, booker, barker, and CEO. He turned Times Square into the showbiz capital of the universe—not Hollywood, not Las Vegas, not Detroit, not Nashville. As the show's announcer cried each Sunday night: "And now, from New York City, the nationally syndicated New York Daily News columnist—Ed Sullivan!" If a nationally syndicated New York columnist was not plugged into America's pop culture, who the hell was?

Sullivan himself had the heart of an autograph collector and the soul of a mogul. To his credit, he gave as many boosts to performers on their way down as on their way up. Stars he had once revered later clung to him, and their legend, for dear life—Buster Keaton, Blossom Seeley, Bert Lahr, Sophie Tucker, Maurice Chevalier. He even tried to ignite the hoofing career of ex-fighter Sugar Ray Robinson by booking him seven times. It didn't help.

Sullivan's personal story, largely played out during the late hours of New York nightlife, holds its own fascination for me. It was a romantic, roistering Big Apple era I've always wished I'd had a bite of. While I never met Sullivan, we did brush columns at the *New York Daily News*, where I was hired in 1972, two years before he died. His by then doddering column, "Little Old New York," ran twice a week in the entertainment section, where I covered nightclubs and reviewed and interviewed stars—just as he had for 30 glittering years.

Sullivan lived through three majestic golden ages in America—the gilded age of sports in the 1920s, which he covered intensely; Broadway's heyday, which included not just theater but also the New York nightclub scene; and finally, TV's own golden age in the 1950s, when he was a towering figure. During the first era, he roamed through the greatest, most dramatic period of sports in America, chronicled by Sullivan and his sportswriting comrades, who invented the athletic Paul Bunyons of his time—Babe Ruth, Jack Dempsey, Red Grange, Ben Hogan, Knute Rockne, Bill Tilden, Jesse Owens, Gene Tunney, and Joe DiMaggio, whom he knew and later proudly paraded on his show. Ed was a huge, authentic, unembarrassed fanatic. Like most other fans, Sullivan saw great athletes as absolute heroes, no matter how decadent their off-field adventures. He was an evangelist for the Frank Merriwell–Bill Stern academy of jock iconography that remains a bedrock of American sports lore.

Ed had a sweaty sweet spot for sports and could never quite bond with show folks as comfortably as he did with athletes. A multisport high-school letterman, briefly a semipro catcher, and an intense lifelong golfer, Sullivan instinctively loved and protected fellow jocks. But he was aloof, unsure, and wary around entertainers. Never more than a stage-door Eddie to singers, comics, and actors, he had few performer pals but many sports cronies. His TV stage was in part a colorful weekly sports page, a primitive ESPN without the attitude. Athletes' exploits were extolled as they took bows in the audience or were invited onstage for verbal victory laps, handshakes, or a stilted exchange with Sullivan. Sports heroes then were even more media-shy and uneasy on camera than the host.

He had consummately eclectic tastes. While his primary passions (girl singers aside) were boxing and golf, he even loved harness racing. Well, you figured, if trotters—or soapbox derby winners or horseshoe champions—were featured on "The Ed Sullivan Show," they must be a big deal. He shared all his enthusiasms with us. After winning a big game, athletes didn't announce they were off to Disneyland—instead, they headed straight for "The Ed Sullivan Show."

Sullivan's early life as sportswriter and then Broadway columnist gave him the confidence, the contacts, and the bravado to take on television. He lucked into both good timing and destiny. He was thrust into the reluctant role of gossipmonger after the *Evening Graphic*'s Broadway columnist moved to a rival paper, opening a prize slot for Sullivan. It wasn't a job he wanted. He was drafted by a desperate editor with a giant hole to fill. During the 1930s and 1940s, Broadway columnists were monarchs at the New York tabloids, more vital than city hall reporters and on the same pedestal as crime reporters.

While Sullivan was never in Walter Winchell's league as a writer, phrasemaker, snoop, or, to be sure, newspaper terrorist, he learned to mount his soapbox as aggressively as any media orator. His dramatic sense of outrage and indignation, a survival tool among gossip merchants, was useful for hanging scarlet letters on the celebrities who stepped over his own blurred moral lines. Sullivan's easily bruised temperament and Irish temper flared famously and often, but quickly subsided. Unlike Winchell, he bore few grudges—except against Winchell, his lifelong goad and nemesis.

Although he reveled in his role as big shot Broadway columnist, Sullivan rarely used his newspaper column as a blunt instrument, as Winchell and the right-wing vigilante Westbrook Pegler did. He seldom picked

public fights, as they did, but he had his share of serial feuds, with Arthur Godfrey, Jack Paar, Jackie Mason, Ingrid Bergman, Joan Crawford, and Frank Sinatra, as well as with Winchell and other fellow columnists. When indignant, he could wield a poison pen.

In retracing Sullivan's giant footprints, you discover rich strains of pure Americana, a lusty, often lurid, lore now gone. Sullivan, for better or worse, lived and publicly championed the majority values of his times—all reflected in his show's broad stripes and bright stars, the sprawling unruly country Sullivan stuffed in that glass box every Sunday night. Unlike anyone else on television, Sullivan directly channeled America's funhouse essence into our homes.

There was never a more alien star in all of show business than Ed Sullivan—nor any that loomed larger or more influentially. Before CBS knew what to do with him, or even whether to dump him, Sullivan became a habit, a fixture, a power broker, a star, and finally a legend who walked like a man (kind of). Simultaneously a titan and a joke, he was TV's first "reality" star 50 years before glorifying the mundane became a 21st-century plague. Nobody on TV was more real, with more warts, than Ed Sullivan.

Even so, Sullivan rides on that great American float of impresarios—Florenz Ziegfeld, the Shubert brothers, Billy Minsky, Sol Hurok, Mike Todd, David Merrick, P. T. Barnum. But he rides as an onstage star as well, unlike any other impresario. Despite his many defects, only Sullivan could have made his show work the way he did. He didn't just handpick performers he loved: an inner faith in his own taste buds told him we would love them too. For 52 weeks a year, he produced an electronic *Time* magazine, but it was also the *Good Housekeeping* of show business, where Sullivan's imprimatur was the ultimate seal of approval. And if Ed also bestowed an awkward pat on a performer's back, this meant even more money in the bank for that entertainer. If he rejected an act or failed to invite someone back, it could be career-damaging, almost worse than being banned by the FCC.

Sullivan wielded his awesome power for both good and not so good—rolling out the red carpet Sunday nights for those he felt deserved a national spotlight, but also rolling up the "Red" carpet quickly when a performer was merely suspected of being a Communist. Although never a shrill right-wing patriot like Winchell, Sullivan made sure we knew that his true colors were red, white, and blue. And yet this same man casually, matter-of-factly, presented scores of great black performers (overriding

race-frightened sponsors), who often appeared on TV for the first time when they stepped onto his stage.

Everything Sullivan stood for—his taste in entertainment, his addiction to celebrities, his adoration of athletes, his racial attitudes—radiated from our sets. Even if Sullivan himself hardly glowed, he also was never a mere grinning front man in the tradition of hosts like Perry Como, Dinah Shore, Andy Williams, and Garry Moore. Ed Sullivan was his own show. It was his idea, his chosen performers onstage whom he bent into his own image of entertainment. Sullivan is a case study in perseverance and bottomless ego, which allowed him to conquer viperish critics, timid sponsors, and even CBS boss William Paley, who kept waiting for Sullivan to crumple so he could be replaced by a more polished host.

Sullivan's chronic addiction to new or unusual acts, plus his own severe attention-span disorder and compulsive need for variety, prodded him to order up a vast array of magicians, animal acts, acrobats, dancers, and scenes from musical and serious theater, right alongside flag-wavers, do-gooders, sports legends, and bowing celebrities. His aim each Sunday was to serve up a cultural TV dinner that would please everyone. As Alan King, Sullivan's go-to comedian, said, "In a sense, what he was doing was using his talent as a newspaperman, scooping everyone. When he heard there was a singing nun in Brussels, he was on the next plane to bring back Sister Sourire."

He was never satisfied with the show, forever doodling and fiddling and second-guessing himself. In search of headlines, he added hour-long celebrity tributes (an early blueprint for A&E's "Biography"), scenes from upcoming movies, and rare onstage interviews with TV-leery film stars (primitive, stand-up talk shows). He regularly toured Europe, inspecting new acts, ultimately camping out with the stars in Las Vegas versions of the TV show. His paid talent scouts lurked everywhere, but he relied as well on tips from bartenders, barbers, waiters, and doormen. Even the poet Carl Sandburg found acts for Sullivan, who boasted to *Time* magazine in 1967, "He got us the Australian woodchopper act . . . and the fellow who stitches his fingers together with a needle and thread." Sullivan fought censors and his own network before heading to Russia to stage a jubilant Moscow show, and later defiantly flew to Havana, hoping to scoop CBS News, to interview Castro.

If he couldn't bag a big-name performer for the stage, Sullivan would sprinkle the house with some—plopping them on the fifth-row aisle to take a celebratory wave during the show, deftly changing the pace and stopping his own show. The audience plants were not just performers