

KOVACS LAND



A
BIOGRAPHY
OF

ERNIE KOVACS

D I A N A R I C O

"A worthy monument to one of TV's most creative forces" —*Variety*

"A must-read for anyone interested in true talent . . . a
one-of-a-kind figure" — Larry King, *USA Today*



A
BIOGRAPHY
OF

ERNIE KOVACS

**D I A N A
R I C O**

HARCOURT
BRACE
JOVANOVICH

SAN DIEGO
NEW YORK
LONDON

Copyright © 1990 by Diana Rico

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Requests for permission to make copies of any part of the work should be mailed to: Permissions Department, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, Orlando, Florida 32887.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Rico, Diana.

Kovacsland: a biography of Ernie Kovacs/by Diana Rico.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-15-147294-7

1. Kovacs, Ernie, 1919–1962. 2. Comedians—United States—Biography.

3. Television personalities—United States—Biography. I. Title.

PN2287.K7R5 1990

791.45'028'092—dc20

[B] 89-24506

Design by Camilla Filancia

Printed in the United States of America

First edition A B C D E



Photograph credit for title page: CBS

Photograph credits for part-title pages:

Part One: Courtesy of Kippie Kovacs

Part Two: New York Daily News

Part Three: Andrew C. McKay Collection

Part Four: NBC/Courtesy of the Museum of Broadcasting

Part Five: NBC/Courtesy of the Museum of Broadcasting

To my mother,
GEORGINA CARLO RICO,
who taught me
to love show business,

And to the memory
of my grandmother,
AMELIA BALLESTER,
a woman of visionary spirit.

I first encountered the work of Ernie Kovacs in 1981, when I was working as an editor and writer for the Academy of Television Arts & Sciences' (ATAS) *Emmy* magazine and was assigned to write an article on Kovacs' pioneering television shows of the 1950s and early '60s. (Kovacs was five years into the TV industry when I was born, but my family preferred the more straightforward slapstick of Lucille Ball and Red Skelton and the verbal comedy of Jack Benny and Phil Silvers over the surreal oddities of Ernie Kovacs.) I was completely taken by what I saw when I screened videos at the ATAS/UCLA Television Archives and at the home of Edie Adams, the comedian's widow. This was a fearlessly iconoclastic and bizarre variety of comedy, nearer in structure and in spirit to absurdist theater and dadaist and surrealist art than to the sitcoms and stand-up routines that have defined most of television comedy since the earliest days. Kovacs was one of the first—and to this day remains one of the relative few—to comprehend that television was not merely radio with pictures added or theater captured on film, but a totally different medium with distinctive traits that could be exploited in unique ways.

A Kovacs drollery might be as simple as a shot of his own head cropped onto an animal's body or as complicated as the contents of an office come to life in sync to a tango melody. It might be gentle and tightly controlled, as in the famous 1957 special starring his silent alter ego Eugene, which became the only U.S. television show presented at the 1958 World's Fair. Or it might be freewheeling and assaultive, as when, in his earliest shows out of Philadelphia, he hurled eggs and pies at the camera and thus, it appeared, at the viewers at home. Via the magic of the television cameras, Kovacs could vacuum the ceiling, fence with himself, make a beard disappear with one touch of a razor, or read poetry from the surface of an egg (made up as his lisping poet laureate, Percy Dovetonsils).

Whether visual, verbal, or a combination of sight and sound, a Kovacs joke always subverted expectation. As his character Mr. Question Man, Ernie was once asked, "I have heard that the earth is not flat, but round like a ball. If this is so, how come people don't fall off it?" "You have stated a common misconception," he replied. "As a matter of fact, people are falling off all the time." He liked to say that he viewed the world at an eighteen-degree angle. His was a deeply personal vision, brought forth within the context of purely commercial entertainment but rooted in cutting-edge artistic experimentation.

Ernie Kovacs' life was cut short by a car accident in 1962, just a week before his forty-third birthday. The offbeat nature of his comedy, combined with his fierce refusal to compromise, had won him a loyal following (including many television critics of his day) but had also prevented him from achieving the mainstream network success of a Gleason or a Caesar or a Berle. However, his legacy grows in importance with each passing year. His experimental work has influenced, directly or indirectly, an astonishing number of video practitioners. The music videos on MTV and other channels, the TV-show and movie spoofs of *Saturday Night Live* and *Second City TV*, the blackouts, teasers, and funny credit sequences of *Laugh-In*, *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, and *The Benny Hill Show*, the casual revelations and deliberately cheap effects of *Late Night with David Letterman* and *It's Garry Shandling's Show* all owe a formal or spiritual debt to Kovacs' pioneering work. Nor has his influence been limited to commercial television. Video artists as divergent as Wolf Vostell, Nam June Paik, Teddy Dibble, Mitchell Kriegman, and Bruce and Norman Yonemato have all explored ground first broken by Kovacs.

In the course of working on the *Emmy* piece, I discovered that twenty years after his death there were still Kovacs fans, people of many different ages and walks of life—not only painters and performance artists, writers and musicians, photographers and animators, but also a switchboard operator, a sales executive, a Xerox clerk, a radio disc jockey. The pattern of my encounters was always the same: Ernie Kovacs' name would come up in passing, and the fan (whose fanhood I had previously not suspected) would instantly recount, without prompting and with a good deal of excitement, his or her favorite memory of Kovacs' comedy. The depth of their delight convinced me that interest in Kovacs had not waned; it had merely gone underground.

The more I learned about him, the more I felt that there was a need for a serious, in-depth biography. (David Walley's 1975 *Nothing in Moderation*, later reprinted as *The Ernie Kovacs Phile*, laid out the groundwork but contained many factual errors and passed over some areas of his life that I consider important.) Ernie's story is partly that of the wild, adventuresome days of early TV, when anything went because there weren't yet any rules; it is the story of a fascinating and powerful industry in the process of creating itself. It encompasses as well the worlds of theater, radio, newspapers, fiction, and films—all media in which Kovacs labored at different times. His personal history is equally compelling, filled with dramatic highs and devastating lows.

This book is based on primary sources; at its core are personal interviews with nearly a hundred individuals who knew Ernie Kovacs, representing every stage and facet of his life. A number of these people had never spoken about him for the public record, and they illuminated many heretofore unexplored aspects of his history, personality, and art. Edie Adams, Ernie's second wife, and a few friends, such as Jack Lemmon, chose not to participate in this project, and I have relied on previously published or broadcast interviews for their comments on Kovacs. However, I received the full cooperation and support of Elisabeth and Kippie Kovacs, Ernie's daughters by his first marriage, and I found many others who were eager to share their reminiscences: classmates, neighbors, and teachers from his childhood years in Trenton; intimates from his days in Long Island summer stock and New York theater school; close friends who watched him enter adulthood in Trenton during World War II and witnessed the progress of his postwar marriage to Bette Lee Wilcox; colleagues from the Trenton radio station where he did his first work in an electronic medium; crew members, writers, performers, producers, and executives who worked with him in television in Philadelphia, New York, and Hollywood; members of the film industry who worked with him in the movies; and personal friends who followed his life to the end. Over and over again I heard the word *aura* used—people remember his ethos, a special combination of quiet gentleness, unfettered imagination, and vivid enjoyment. There was another word I heard over and over. "I hope I have let you understand that I *loved* this man!" one crew member in his sixties exclaimed at the conclusion of our interview. Many people loved Kovacs deeply and still do. They all let me understand that.

The interviews were augmented by my extensive screenings of Kovacs' video work, not just his own television shows but his appearances on many other programs of his day, ranging from chat shows like Edward R. Murrow's *Person to Person* to dramatic anthologies such as *Alcoa/Goodyear Theater*. I also viewed and researched the ten feature films in which Kovacs appeared and which have been given short shrift in previous discussions of his work; I was surprised to discover that he was a good and meticulous actor, working hard to create interesting characterizations even when his roles were secondary (as they often were). I spent many months poring over scripts, production notes, correspondence, and other documents pertaining to his television and movie work; examining the daily columns he wrote for the *Trentonian* in the 1940s; tracing facts in church, school, court, and other public records; and reading through hundreds of newspaper, trade paper, and maga-

zine articles written about Kovacs both during his lifetime and up until the present day. (Some of the print material was exceedingly rare: the late Minerva Davenport, for example, provided me with radio scripts she had written for Ernie in the 1940s, the only written material I have ever been able to find pertaining to his early radio work in Trenton; and Laurel Spira of the New Jersey Network passed on to me a trove of reviews and programs she had uncovered relating to the summer stock studio where Ernie worked just after leaving high school.) In only one area was I frustrated: the Philadelphia court files covering Kovacs' early 1950s divorce and custody fight turned up empty. Elisabeth and Kippie Kovacs, to whose lives these papers directly relate, have never seen them and could only speculate as to how they might have disappeared. TV writer April Smith was under the impression that she was working from original court documents, yellowed and crumbling with age, when she wrote the script for the 1984 ABC TV movie *Between the Laughter*, based on this period in Kovacs' life; she says she was loaned them by Edie Adams. Adams, however, says that she has no knowledge of any such files that are part of the public record, so the disposition of these papers remains a mystery.

During my research I visited many places in Trenton, Philadelphia, New York, and Los Angeles where Ernie Kovacs spent his time. Having grown up bicultural (a Puerto Rican transplanted to Los Angeles as a child), I was particularly interested in tracing the Hungarian immigrant community and family influences that had shaped his youth. It had always seemed to me that his humor was deeply rooted in these influences, not only the gallery of goofy ethnic characters he created but in the sense one gets, watching his sketches, that one is traveling through a world where the logic is foreign and bizarre. The bilingual Kovacs also delighted in playing with language and accents, and he understood the inherent funniness in the sounds of different languages, quite apart from the meanings of the words.

Two elements of this book require brief explanation. First, the title is taken from the name of one of Kovacs' Philadelphia shows, *Ernie in Kovacsland*. Second, I have reconstructed Ernie's comedy bits from my own screenings, colleagues' descriptions, reviews of the time, and similar sources; to convey the spirit in which they were created and performed, I have written them in the style of Ernie's early scripts.

Finally, I would like to note that although countless books have been written about the seminal talents who shaped the American film industry—Chaplin and Keaton, Hitchcock and Hawks, Lubitsch and Lang, Capra and Ford—our television history is still woefully under-

explored. Ernie Kovacs was as significant to TV as these filmmakers were to movies. Ultimately, I believe that he may have been more significant to our current culture—to our everyday lives—because his was the medium that has dominated our consciousness since the 1950s, when the American movie studio system began to crumble and cinematic outings were replaced by evenings in front of the tube. Kovacs well understood the power of which television was capable. “This TV medium has never been fully explored,” he once said. “It’s completely different from movies and the stage. It has to be developed on its own.” Perpetually fighting against the industry’s self-imposed limitations, he violated barriers, overturned expectations, and exuberantly celebrated the silliness of life. His courage is to be respected, and his magical wit—the products of which still carry the power to astonish, still seem fresh and funny and smart—is to be cherished.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In the course of writing one person's life, a biographer intersects the lives of many. I would like to express my deep appreciation, first, to Elisabeth and Kippie Kovacs. Once they had ascertained that my project was a serious one, they gave unstintingly of their time, memories, and support, asking no right of censorship or control in return. Their cooperation has helped me to illuminate some important and hitherto unexplored corners of their father's life, and their generous encouragement has been a balm and an ongoing blessing.

I owe more than I can say to my excellent researcher, Catherine Taylor. With the spirit of a true detective, Cathy tracked down interviewees, uncovered obscure documents, checked countless facts, transcribed tapes, and gathered background material on subjects ranging from compulsive gambling to Hungarian immigration; through all this, her enthusiasm never flagged. I am also grateful to Bret Baughman for his aid in photo research and to Steve Witte and Terry March for helping to verify facts for the appendixes.

Without the reminiscences of scores of Ernie Kovacs' friends and colleagues, I could not have reconstructed his life or conveyed what I have of his unique spirit. I am deeply indebted to all who agreed to interviews for this book. Many interviewees went beyond the call of duty, offering me such special support as connections with others who knew Kovacs as well as pictures, tapes, and other materials from their private collections. For this extra help I would like to thank Robert Fell, Michael Fonde, John and Jane Hess, Louis (Deke) Heyward, Bobby Hughes, Robert Kemp, Kippie Kovacs, Barney Kramer, Donald Matern, Andy McKay, Virginia Wales, and the late Minerva Davenport.

My research path was smoothed by the patient and knowledgeable staff members of numerous institutions: Richard W. Reeves of the Trentoniana Collection, Free Public Library, Trenton; the personnel at the Theater Collection of the Free Library of Philadelphia and, in the same city, Marie Adams of the Samuel Paley Library, Temple University; in New York, Jeffrey Fuerst, Ellen O'Neal, Roberta Panjwani, Janet Rassweiler, and Ron Simon of the Museum of Broadcasting and the staff of the Billy Rose Theatre Collection of the New York Public Library at Lincoln Center; the employees of the Motion Picture and Television Reading Room, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.; and, in Los Angeles, the staffs of the American Film Institute's Louis B. Mayer Library, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences'

Margaret Herrick Library, and UCLA's Theater Arts Library and the Department of Special Collections of the University Research Library.

For additional useful materials, advice, and support, I would like to thank John and Sarita Barbour; Cheryl Ann Barna; J. J. Barry of the IBEW; Elizabeth Bates; Mason Buck; Don Freeman; Myra Vanderpool Gormley; Eddie Hatrak, Jr.; Mary Jenkins; Albert J. Kovacs; Jerry McCarthy; Agnes Mihalik of the University of California, Berkeley; the Reverend Stephen N. Mustos; Dr. Richard J. Rosenthal of the California Council on Compulsive Gambling; Pat Shanahan and her *Trentonian* colleagues; Robert Shubert; Bonnie Squires of Temple University; Jule Van Kirk; and Arnold Wexler of the Council on Compulsive Gambling of New Jersey.

I was moved as well as aided by the generosity of two earlier Kovacs scholars who enthusiastically shared their information and thoughts with me: Laurel Spira who coproduced WNJT's 1980 documentary *Cards and Cigars: The Trenton in Ernie Kovacs*, and Mary Lou Cassidy, whose 1970 University of Kansas thesis contains the first important body of research on Ernie's Philadelphia years. My appreciation also goes to Richard Krafus for sparking my interest in Kovacs; to Michael Hamillburg for his early belief in this project; and to Barbara Brighton for enabling me to travel this path.

No author could ask for a more supportive group of people than I have had surrounding me at Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. I am grateful to Vaughn Andrews and Camilla Filancia for their splendid cover and inside designs, exactly in keeping with the spirit of the book; to assistant editor Vicki Austin for her reliable efficiency and good cheer; to Leigh Haber and Dori Weintraub for their promotional efforts; and most of all to my editor, John Radziewicz, for his smart and elegant editing and for his sensitive support in more ways than I can name.

Every author knows the invisible but crucial ways in which friends and family make it possible for a book to get written. My warm gratitude for many kinds of sustenance goes to my parents, Luis and Georgina Rico; to my brothers, Carlos and Jorge Luis Rico; to my cousin Rosa Soto; and to my friends Cindy Alexander, Deborah Hammond Bayer, Susan Emmanule, Stan Friedman, Nancy Hathaway, Karen Jolkovski, Catherine and Dennis Kolodin, Michael Margolis, Laura Napela, Marty Olmstead, Thea Piegdon, Joyce Sunila, and the members of the House of Women and Cats, who saw this book being born: Sharon Lake, Nora MacClelland, Susan Shoop, Ann Warren, and Julie Wolff. And finally, my greatest appreciation and love go to my husband, Steve Arron, for keeping me secure and keeping me laughing all these years.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	ix
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	xv
PART ONE:	
BEGINNINGS (1919–1941)	1
PART TWO:	
RADIO WAVES (1941–1950)	41
PART THREE:	
ERNIE IN TELEVISIONLAND (1950–1952)	79
PART FOUR:	
NETWORK ROULETTE (1952–1957)	129
PART FIVE:	
THE RAINBOW'S END (1957–1962)	231
EPILOGUE	305
NOTES	313
APPENDIX 1:	
TELEVISION SERIES AND SPECIALS	337
APPENDIX 2:	
TELEVISION GUEST APPEARANCES	339
APPENDIX 3:	
FEATURE FILMS	342
INDEX	345

Two eight-page sections of photographs follow pages 144 and 240.

PART

ONE

BEGINNINGS

1919 – 1941



On a steep, winding street off Coldwater Canyon in Beverly Hills, a rambling house hides behind a high, thick hedge and a wrought-iron gate. Made of brick with a black slate roof, the structure is set on a rise above the street, fronted by a modest lawn and flower beds. Nothing distinguishes it from the other houses in this quiet neighborhood—at least nothing that is immediately visible.

Back in the early 1960s, however, the accoutrements that had been added to make life comfortable in this house were far beyond those of the typical upscale Coldwater Canyon home. The house featured an enormous mechanized turntable in the driveway so that friends who dropped by at odd hours could easily turn around their Jaguars and Rolls-Royces and Mercedes-Benzes. The two older girls in the family could frolic in the backyard pool, which was next to a Japanese garden; the youngest girl, a baby, had her own nursery in a new two-story wing. An intricate system of television sets and hi-fi's piped entertainment indoors and out. A sixteenth-century antique harpsichord and a pet donkey named Piccolo were among the more unusual inhabitants. Callers who phoned when the owners were not home were greeted by an answering machine message with an impeccable English accent—this at a time when answering machines were virtually unknown.

A graceful brick archway over the driveway divided the main house from a smaller structure, a garage that had been transformed into a den. For its owner, Ernie Kovacs, this comfortably cluttered, wood-paneled, leather-furnished den was the pulsing heart of the house, the material and symbolic manifestation of the comedian's lifetime motto, "Nothing in moderation." Once a poor Trenton boy from an immigrant Hungarian family, now a rich television and movie star, Ernie had outfitted his den with most of what was significant to him in life.

Dominating the uppermost level of the three-story space was a green-felt card table for his favorite (some said dangerously so) pastime, poker; here he would

hold marathon card parties with such close friends as Jack Lemmon, Tony Curtis, Dean Martin, and Billy Wilder, quite often losing but never wanting to stop. A library was filled not just with books but with a beautiful collection of valuable military artifacts: "a brace of French dueling pistols," as one visitor observed, "helmets (Spanish, Roman, Saracen), an old Persian shield, Spanish breastplates, a Chinese cannon, an ivory-inlaid blunderbuss, medieval shields and suits of armor." The library also contained an oversized desk built especially to accommodate Ernie's six-foot-two, 215-pound frame. This held a panel of electronic controls from which he could communicate with his household via an intercom network, manipulate the gadgets inside the house and out, and experiment with the video and sound effects that he loved. Decorations included a stuffed rhinoceros head, an indoor waterfall, and an enormous polar-bearskin rug, onto which his collection of 14,000 records often overflowed. In the original bath he had enlarged the shower and added a steam-bathing room, and several times a day (or night) he might repair to the latter for a lengthy steam bath. Beneath the main space was a wine cellar stocked with the finest wines and champagnes, which his special-effects men sprayed with rubber cobwebs and fuller's earth to lend a properly aged look. Most important of all was the electric sign just outside the den's entrance. Like a home-style version of an ON AIR sign, it read NOT NOW, and nobody—colleagues, family, friends, servants—was allowed to enter when it was lit. Often he'd spend all night there, for he worked best at night, and his daughters or his second wife, singer-actress Edie Adams, would wake to find the sign still on and wonder whether he had slept at all.

This was an extraordinary level of escape to have achieved, an extraordinary amount of control to have over one's environment. But why did he need to escape; why did he crave the control? By 1961—in only a decade—Kovacs had made a unique mark upon the young medium of TV. Behind his signature black mustache and ever-present Havana cigar, Ernie Kovacs possessed the most bizarre, anarchic comedic mind ever to have hit the tube. He instinctively understood the special, intimate qualities and vast electronic potential of the small screen, and he was adventuresome and imaginative and funny enough to exploit them:

ERNIE DRAWS A STICK OF DYNAMITE . . . IT EXPLODES

ERNIE SAWS THROUGH THE TREE BRANCH HE'S SITTING
ON . . . THE TRUNK FALLS

ERNIE DRIVES A GOLFBALL INTO THE CAMERA LENS . . . THE
GLASS SHATTERS

ERNIE PAINTS OUR TV SCREEN BLACK

The comedy that Ernie was creating was truly visionary. It could not exist on the vaudeville or nightclub stage, would not work in the oversized scale of the motion picture screen. It took view of the fact that the audience was sitting around at home watching a magical box that hadn't been there a decade or two earlier. Ernie's special gift to his viewers was to enter their living rooms and pull as many delightful visions out of his head as he could, like rabbits out of a hat.

Ernie Kovacs was a man of vast extremes, an ambitious and supremely gifted workaholic, a compulsive and self-destructive gambler, a generous and sometimes frustrating lover, father, and friend. He deliberately lived his life at a fever pitch, and by 1961 he had experienced much joy, but he had also trapped himself within many situations from which he yearned to escape.

Always the high roller, the biggest of the big spenders, at the peak of his professional stature he had driven his finances into the ground. He was deeply in debt from gambling, from excessive high living, from overspending on production budgets, and from having neglected to pay his income taxes. He was working for superhuman stretches of up to forty hours with little or no sleep and pouring whatever energy he had left into frantic efforts to hide the monetary problems from his wife, whom he felt it was his duty to protect. There were other difficulties—disappointment over his failure to do auteur-level work in the movies, for example, and frustration with his inability to make progress on various literary projects. Cracks were beginning to show in his marriage and family life; strain was beginning to show in his darkly handsome face.

"I like to be onstage," Ernie once confided to his writer Rex Lardner, "because nobody can bother me there. Lawyers, process servers, insurance salesmen—anyone." On a sound stage, behind the shielding glass of the television screen, Ernie Kovacs felt safe and in control, and these were the conditions he attempted to reproduce in his extravagant Beverly Hills den made-to-order. Performing on TV or locked up inside his den, protected by electric signs warning people away, Ernie could shut out the rest of the world, with its never-ending money worries and personal conflicts and professional frustrations. He could take control and let his imagination run wild and create glorious illusions to