

The Legacy of I Love Lucy

By Kaushik Raghavan

I Love Lucy is one of the most influential shows in television history. Not only is it one of the most popular shows ever released (with *TV Guide* ranking it as the second greatest TV show in history and *Time Magazine* putting it on their unranked top 100 list) but it created many of the practices that we have seen in TV shows for decades.

One of the biggest changes in the creation of *I Love Lucy* is the way episodes were created. *I Love Lucy*, like most sitcoms at the time—both TV and radio—was filmed before a live audience in a theater. What separated *I Love Lucy* from the rest was the way that they recorded and distributed the show. *I Love Lucy* was the first show shot before a live studio audience and filmed on 35mm film. This was a major departure from the industry standard of how TV sitcoms were filmed. Most TV shows were filmed in New York, where most TV owners lived and there were ample theaters to film in. These productions were broadcast live to TVs on the East Coast but were unavailable for people living further west. However, Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz did not want to leave their home in Los Angeles and move to the East Coast to film their show.



LUCILLE BALL AND DESI ARNAZ IN THE KITCHEN IN 1947.

In the past, to work around this time zone problem, shows would record a monitor showing the live feed on kinescope. These kinescoped programs were grainy and low quality, but the West Coast markets were considered unimportant in comparison to the East Coast market. Ball and Arnaz decided that they would distribute a kinescoped product to the East Coast. When the pilot episode was kinescoped and shown to potential sponsor Phillip Morris, they were apprehensive of showing the spoiled Eastern audience such a low-quality broadcast. Both Ball and Arnaz then insisted that they would record the show on 35mm film, the standard film for movies. Both CBS and Phillip Morris balked at the additional cost of recording on film, but when Ball and Arnaz offered to take a \$1,000 weekly pay cut each, the producers acquiesced. The agreement included the stipulation that Ball and Arnaz would own 80% of the film rights and the remaining 20% would be given to writer/producer Jess Oppenheimer and writers Bob Carroll Jr. and Madelyn Pugh. Since the series was shot on 35mm film, it was able to be shown many more times at the original quality level. This allowed them the opportunity to do reruns and the TV industry was forever changed. Because the series could be reshow



LUCILLE BALL AND HER SECOND HUSBAND GARY MORTON AT THE 61ST ACADEMY AWARDS IN 1989.



THE CAST OF DESILU'S TV SHOW *STAR TREK* IN FRONT OF THE SPACE SHUTTLE *ENTERPRISE*.

when other programs of the era could not, *I Love Lucy* became one of the most watched shows in history.

Since *I Love Lucy* was able to be shown so many times, one aspect stood out to viewers at the time, the laughter of the audience. The audience's laughter was also recorded live when each episode was taped, capturing their responses in real-time and using them in the finished episode. As time moved on, TV studios moved away from filming before a live audience, but something was missing: the audience's laughter. Studios began using "laugh tracks," sound effects of laughing audiences to help cue the at-home audiences when something was funny. While *I Love Lucy* never used an artificial laugh track, it set the stage for its creation and widespread adoption. One of the longest-lasting techniques pioneered by the production team of *I Love Lucy* is the three-camera setup. Due to the show's new filming priorities, cinematographer Karl Freund set up three cameras filming at the same time and the scenes were cut together after the scene had been shot. It was an efficient and economical way to capture the recording, rather than moving cameras during the live production. This might not seem like a massive advancement in the medium of TV, but the three-camera setup established in *I Love Lucy* became the standard used for

sitcoms like *Friends*, *The Big Bang Theory*, *How I Met Your Mother*, *Seinfeld*, and many others.

Since Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz owned the filming rights to *I Love Lucy*, they needed an entity to control those rights. Arnaz reorganized a company that he had founded to manage his band's music rights to also manage *I Love Lucy*. He renamed the company to be a combination of his and Ball's names, and Desilu was created. Both Arnaz and Ball were equal shareholders in the company until their 1962 divorce when Ball purchased Arnaz's share of the company. Ball then stepped into the roles of President and Chief Executive Officer. She would be the first woman to head a major studio and one of the most powerful people in Hollywood. Under her supervision, Ball led Desilu to be the largest independent studio in the US. During her tenure, she approved many shows that are still in the cultural zeitgeist like *Star Trek*, *The Untouchables*, and *Mission: Impossible*—which would go on to inspire the later movies. Ball continued to lead Desilu until 1968, when she sold it to Gulf + Western for \$17 million (valued at \$162 million today). Desilu was converted into the television arm of Paramount Pictures, which still holds the rights to *I Love Lucy* today.