

Introduction

Growing up in suburban Detroit during the 1970s, I spent a lot of time parked in front of the television. As part of a wave known as TV's second generation, I was fortunate enough to witness the tail end of what has become a lost art form. Long before the blitz of cable, satellite dishes, prepackaged syndication, infomercials, and reality shows, there existed a brand of pop culture charm that has forever vanished from the airwaves . . . it was known as LOCAL TV!

Back in the days when a hometown television celebrity was someone other than a news anchor, Motor City stations had a host of stars worth showcasing. In the days of my youth alone, I loved waking up to our clowns Bozo and Oopsy. On rainy and wintry afternoons, I reveled in classic B movies with Bill Kennedy and cheesy horror flicks with Sir Graves Ghastly. After the evening news, I'd watch Bob Allison give away more dinners for two at the Roostertail restaurant than the cash jackpot to neighborhood contestants on *Bowling for Dollars*. And when my parents would let me stay up past my bedtime it was a real treat catching the late-night shenanigans of the Ghoul.

Those are just a few of my personal memories, but, going back even farther to television's first generation, Detroit baby boomers grew up with an even larger ensemble of local heroes. Who can forget the likes of such characters as Soupy Sales, Captain Jolly, and Sagebrush Shorty? How about the lovable circus clown Ricky or the Twin Pines magical clown Milky? Who remembers taxiing their tricycles close to the screen to see *Wixie's Wonderland*? Better yet, who was brave enough to travel way beyond the Ishkabow and over the Foo-Fram Sea for fun with *Jingles in Boofland*? And when the music was changing which Motown teens kept in step with the week's hottest records on *Swingin' Time*?

These classic shows and many more belong to a dying breed of home-made talent that's been overshadowed by the popularity and publicity of our sports figures and musicians. Detroit TV played a key role in many of our upbringings, for which it's earned a special fondness in our memo-

ries. The emotional attachment our community has to these shows is the main reason why I chose to write this book.

Early in 2004, I was engaged in a nostalgic conversation with a friend. We reminisced about all the wonderfully unique things that have disappeared from Detroit—everything from restaurants to stores to drive-ins, radio stations, and local television shows. It was the part about the TV programs that stuck in my mind. Having worked as an independent television producer, I remembered how much those little local shows inspired me to pursue a career in the media. And because they had such an impact on me I was curious to see just how much they meant to others.

After speaking to a few more individuals, the consensus was the same. Faces lit up with smiles from ear to ear at the mere mention of an old show. It was obvious that someone should do a book to preserve the memory of our television heritage! After all, a number of books have been written that display the richness of Detroit in various contexts: its civic history, architectural wonders, the auto industry, music, and sports. So in late April, with the help of my friend Larry Dlusky (the most trivia-oriented person I know), I began to develop a proposal for a book that would feature 25 of the most popular programs that stand out in people's minds when they think of vintage Detroit TV.

On July 3, 2004, I began the first of what was to become a long but very pleasurable series of interviews. The goal was to tell stories about the shows from the perspective of those who lived them and the fans who loved them! To pull this off, I interviewed 79 people: everyone from the program talent to directors, producers, stagehands, program guests, fans, and relatives of the deceased talent. Why so many? Simply because I wanted the information presented in this publication to be an oral account of Detroit's television history from several viewpoints. Additionally, I think it's much more fascinating to hear what the people involved have to say than to read an outside party's interpretation of events.

Approximately 90 percent of these interviews were conducted in person, with the balance taking place over the telephone. As large as the undertaking was, I saw it as an awesome thrill—a childhood fantasy come true! Not only did I get to meet many of the stars I marveled at as a kid, but in several instances I was a guest in their homes. Most of these folks are still in Michigan, but to interview some of them I traveled as far as New York, Florida, and California. The warm receptions I received from all of them were indeed touching. Their eagerness to relive the "golden age" of Detroit TV was endearing.

Some of the interviews I thought would make wonderful stories in themselves. These included the rainy Saturday afternoon when Trudy Sales served hors d'oeuvres to her husband and me, thus allowing me to

have “lunch with Soupy,” and the playful banter between John Kelly and Marilyn Turner, which was like having an exclusive front-row seat at an episode of *Kelly & Company*. There were nonstop laughs with Johnny Ginger and the fun of watching Shaun Robinson spring from her *Access Hollywood* chair to demonstrate a dance step she once performed on *The Scene*. I placed my hands inside Boofland puppets Herkimer Dragon and Cecil B. Rabbit and browsed through the personal effects of the late Bill Kennedy at his Palm Beach estate.

Although each interview had its moments, the most precious one for me was when I met Lawson Deming, better known as Sir Graves Ghastly. This 91-year-old man who’s now in a wheelchair and breathing with the aid of an oxygen tank, did his best to reprise that unforgettable “neeeyaaahh” laugh we’ve all grown to love . . . without my asking! Unfortunately, due to his physical condition, he couldn’t sustain the long, echoing part of the laugh. He tried three times to no avail. As I was packing up my recorder and preparing to leave, Mr. Deming gave it one final shot. The frustration of not being able to perform the laugh was evident on his face. And, even though the last laugh was no different than the previous ones, bless his heart for trying! On my departure, I shook his hand and said, “Long live Sir Graves Ghastly.” Responding like a true showman, he raised his left eyebrow to give me “the eye” . . . that famous Sir Graves stare!

The following pages are filled with countless stories that are humorous, compassionate, inspiring, and above all memorable. This book is a tribute to those we welcomed into our living rooms over the years and whose creative talents we’ll forever cherish. Stay tuned to revisit your favorite local shows, brought to you by *TV Land—Detroit!*