

Remembering Sid Caesar

- Amber Born

On February 12 of this year, entertainer Sid Caesar died at the age of ninety-one. Much of his television work was destroyed long before his death, and he was most active during the 1950s, so many younger people live in complete ignorance of who Sid Caesar was, and why he was, and remains today, such an influential figure in television.

Sid Caesar was a comedian, a man with a broader talent range than most performers do now. A gifted saxophonist, sketch comedian, and mimicry artist, Caesar had a live TV variety show in the 1950s called *Your Show of Shows*. It was an era when not everyone had access to television, so the sketches were written with a sophisticated, educated audience in mind. There were parodies of foreign films, with the dialogue in Caesar's famous "doubletalk," which consists of imitations of other languages. He and fellow *Your Show of Shows* stars Carl Reiner, Imogene Coca, and Howard Morris spoke in a combination of gibberish, real words from other languages, and English, for an impressive and hilarious effect.

The sketches on *Your Show of Shows* were innovative, clean, varied, and (most importantly) funny: an entirely pantomimed argument taking place between a husband and wife to the music of Beethoven's Fifth, a parody of *From Here to Eternity* entitled *From Here to Obscurity*, a double-talk parody of the Italian film *La Bicicletta*. Watch any sketch from *Your Show of Shows* or *Caesar's Hour*, Caesar's sketch show after *Your Shows of Shows* ended, and the parallels can be seen between Caesar's work and later sketch/variety shows, such as *Saturday Night Live*. *SNL* is significantly raunchier than *Your Show of Shows*, but I would say that *Your Show of Shows* is funnier, primarily because of the talent of the cast, Caesar's brilliance, and the phenomenal writing of the show.

Caesar's *Your Show of Shows* and *Caesar's Hour* were also legendary in the comedians and writers they produced. The *Your Show of Shows* staff was home to, among others, Mel Brooks, a writer, actor, and director for movies such as *Blazing Saddles*, *High Anxiety*, *Young Frankenstein*, and *Spaceballs*, as well as the TV show *Get Smart*, which inspired the 2008 movie, Neil Simon, author of the play *Laughter on the 23rd Floor*, written about his time spent on *Your Show of Shows*, as well as dozens of other stage and screen plays, and Carl Reiner, a cast member of *Your Show of Shows*, who created *The Dick Van Dyke Show* and appears periodically in *Two and a Half Men*. Additionally, Reiner and Mel Brooks created the mock interview series *The 2000 Year Old Man*, which you should definitely look up on YouTube, even if it has nothing to do with Sid Caesar. Larry Gelbart, who went on to create *M*A*S*H*, wrote for Caesar's *Hour*. Woody Allen also wrote for Caesar, and his credentials need no explanation at all.

I'll close my article with two quotes from Sid Caesar himself: "In between goals is a thing called life, that has to be lived and enjoyed," and "The guy who invented the first wheel was an idiot. The guy who invented the other three, he was a genius."