

Putting on a Really Big Shoe

By Dennis Payton Knight

Time Magazine observed, "His smile is that of a man sucking a lemon." Old Stone Face knew it and rued it himself, "I've tried every way I know to smile into a camera, but I can't do it."

Despite his shortcomings in charisma, Ed Sullivan ruled Sunday nights for 23 years, from 1948 to 1971, with his television variety show, a delightful mish-mash that brought us acts from puppet shows to opera to comedians to rock-and-roll, often in the same hour. His inaugural show featured Martin and Lewis, a pianist, a ballerina, a troupe of singing firemen, and the boxing referee scheduled to judge an upcoming bout between Joe Louis and Jersey Joe Wolcott.

Sullivan, a veteran sports writer, and gossip columnist, was never easy to get along with, but he had a sense of humor about himself and his awkward television persona. He even hired impersonators like Rich Little and Will Jordan to imitate him on his show, exaggerating the Irishman's stiffness and raised shoulders. They would mimic his common introductions like, "And now, right here on our stage...", "For all you youngsters out there...", and, of course, his opening promises week after week of "a really big 'shew' for you tonight."

Sullivan would never become a performer himself. Critics at first panned his program, but veteran performers appreciated its appeal. A droll Fred Allen observed, "Ed Sullivan will last as long as someone else has talent." Alan King said, "Ed does nothing, but he does it better than anyone else in television."

Sullivan had a flair for identifying talent and paid to get it. He was a star maker who engaged performers on the basis of ability, without regard to origin or color. It was another quality he believed helped his show win a wide and loyal audience.

In 1956, Sullivan, at first wary of an emerging young star's image as a bad boy, was reluctant to book him, but Elvis Presley became too big to ignore, and Old Stone Face signed him for three appearances. Later, getting to know him personally, Sullivan told his audience, "This is a real decent, fine boy."

After that experience, Sullivan was determined to get ahead of the industry and booked soaring new talents before other shows could get them. The Beatles came to America to be first on Ed Sullivan in February 1964. He went on to get Buddy Holly, The Rolling Stones, Janis Joplin, Marvin Gaye, Diana Ross and the Supremes, and countless others.

Edward Vincent Sullivan died of esophageal cancer in 1974 at age 73. The shows Old Stone Face put on the air for twenty-three years have never been duplicated, but why not? Sullivan did it not with magic, but because he recognized a vast variety of unique talent as the spice of entertainment. Maybe, someday, someone new with Sullivan's vision will come along to put on for us just one more "really big shew."

Cue the applause.