

THE FLIP WILSON SHOW

U.S. Comedy Variety Program

The *Flip Wilson Show* was the first successful network variety series with an African-American star. In its first two seasons, its Nielsen ratings placed it as America's second most-watched show. Flip Wilson based his storytelling humor on his background in black clubs, but adapted easily to a television audience. The show's format dispensed with much of the clutter of previous variety programs and focused on the star and his guests.

Clerow "Flip" Wilson had been working small venues for over a decade when Redd Foxx observed his act in 1965 and raved about him to Johnny Carson. As a result, Wilson made over 25 appearances on the *Tonight Show*, and in 1968, NBC signed him to a five-year development deal.

Wilson made guest appearances on shows such as *Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In* and the first episode of *Love, American Style*. On 22 September 1969, he appeared with 20 other up and coming comics in a Bob Hope special, which was followed by a *Flip Wilson Show* special, a pilot for the series to come. The special introduced many distinctive elements that would be part of the series, the most striking element the small round stage in the middle of the audience, from which Wilson told jokes and where guests sang and performed sketches with minimal sets.

For his opening monologue in that special, Wilson told a story about a minister's wife who tried to justify her new extravagant purchase by explaining how "the Devil made me buy this dress!" The wife's voice was the one subsequently used for all his female characters, whether a girlfriend or Queen Isabella ("Christopher Columbus going to *find* Ray Charles!"). Later in the special, he put a look to the voice in a sketch opposite guest Jonathan Winters. Winters played his swinging granny character, Maudie Frickert, as an airline passenger, and when Wilson donned a contemporary stewardess' outfit—loud print miniskirt and puffy cap—Geraldine Jones was born. The audience howled as Winters apparently met his match.

NBC was encouraged with the special to go forward with a regular series, and *The Flip Wilson Show* joined the fall lineup on 17 September 1970. Wilson appeared at the opening and explained that there was no big opening production number, because it would have cost \$104,000. "So I thought I would show you what \$104,000 looks like." Flashing a courier's case filled with bills before the camera and audience, he asked, "Now, wasn't that much better than watching a bunch of girls jumping around the stage?"

That monologue illustrated one of the chances Wilson and his producer, Bob Henry, took. They did away with the variety show's conventional chorus lines, singers and dancers, and allowed the star and his guests to carry the show. The creative



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gamble paid off as *The Flip Wilson Show* defeated all comers in its time slot and won two Emmy Awards in 1971: as Best Variety Show and for Best Writing in a Variety Show.

The show was also a landmark in the networks' fitful history of integrating its prime-time lineup. Nat "King" Cole had been the first African American to host a variety show, which NBC carried on a sustaining basis in 1956. Despite appearances by guests such as Frank Sinatra, Tony Bennett and Harry Belafonte, that program could neither attract sponsors, nor obtain sufficient clearances from affiliates. Cole left the air at the end of 1957. Later, NBC was more successful with Bill Cosby in *I Spy*, and Diahann Carroll as *Julia*. The week after *The Flip Wilson Show's* premiere, ABC debuted its first all-black situation comedy, an unsuccessful adaptation of Neil Simon's *Barefoot in the Park*.

During the run of his show Wilson created several other characters who flirted with controversy. There was the Rev. Leroy, of the Church of What's Happenin' Now, whose sermons were tinged with a hint of larceny; Freddy the Playboy: always, but unsuccessfully, on the make; and Sonny, the White House janitor, who knew more than the president about what was going on.

But Geraldine Jones was by far the most popular character on the series. Wilson wrote Geraldine's material himself and tried not to use her to demean black women. Though flirty and flashy, Geraldine was no "finger popping chippie." She was based partly on Butterfly McQueen's character in *Gone with the Wind*: unrefined but outspoken and honest ("What you see is what you get, honey!"). She expected respect and was devoted to her unseen boyfriend, "Killer." It also helped that Flip had the legs for the role, and did not burlesque Geraldine's build, though NBC Standards and Practices did ask him to reduce Geraldine's bust a little.

Another aspect of the show's appeal was its variety of guests. Like Ed Sullivan, Flip tried to appeal to as wide an audience as possible. The premiere sew dames Brown, David Frost and the Sesame Street Muppets. A later show offered Roger Miller, the Temptations, Redd Foxx and Lily Tomlin, whom Freddy the Playboy tried to pick up. Roy Clark, Bobby Darin and Denise Nicholas joined Wilson for a "Butch Cassidy and the Suntan Kid" sketch.

The Flip Wilson Show turned out to be one of the last successful variety shows. CBS' 1972 offering, *The Waltons*, became a surprise hit, winning the same Thursday time slot. By the 1973-74 season, it was John-Boy and company who had the second most popular show of the season. NBC put Wilson's show to rest, airing its last episode on 24 June 1974.

—Mark R. McDermott

REGULAR PERFORMERS

Flip Wilson
The Jack Regas Dancers
The George Wyle Orchestra

PRODUCER Bob Henry

PROGRAMMING HISTORY

• NBC
September 1970–June 1971 Thursday 7:30-8:30
September 1971–June 1974 Thursday 8:00-9:00

FURTHER READING

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See also Wilson, Flip; Variety Programs