



AND AWAY WE GO ...

By Charles Apple | THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

What was America’s favorite sitcom of the 1950s? After “I Love Lucy,” perhaps ...

That would probably be “The Honeymooners” starring Jackie Gleason. It spent 10 seasons on television between 1951 and 1970, but most of that as sketches performed on other shows.

“The Honeymooners” lasted only one season — 39 episodes — on CBS. That season debuted Oct. 1, 1955: 70 years ago.

THE EVOLUTION OF ‘THE HONEYMOONERS’

After a year of hosting a weekly variety show called “Cavalcade of Stars” on the DuMont TV network, comedian Jackie Gleason decided he wanted a running skit that would portray humor in the life of a blue-collar couple struggling to get by in modern-day Brooklyn.

Gleason and his writers based their

sketch about a blowhard bus driver, his sharp wife and his goofy neighbors on a popular radio show at the time, “The Bickersons.” They planned to call their sketch “The Beast,” “The Lovers” or “The Couple Next Door” before they settled on “The Honeymooners.”

A six-minute sketch first appeared on “Cavalcade of Stars” on Oct. 5, 1951. Gleason would bring the characters back time and time again — 26 times over the next nine or so months and added a pair

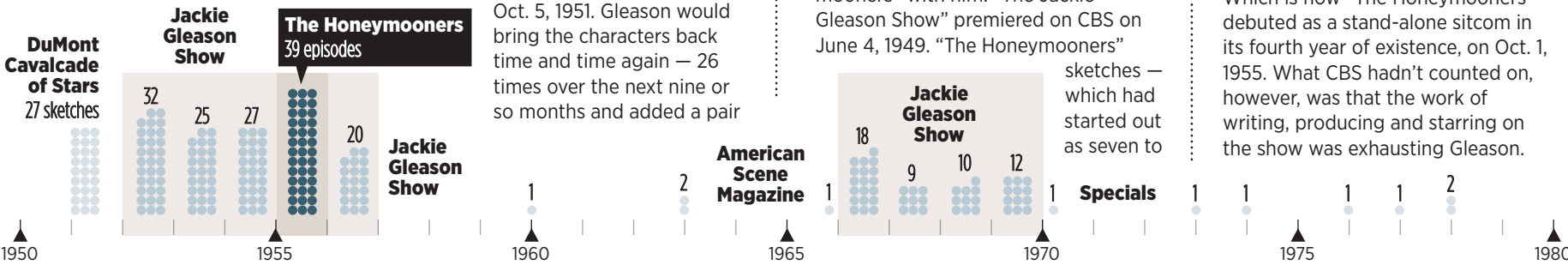
of friends for the Kramdens. “The Honeymooners” sketches were so popular that the audience share of Gleason’s show rose from 9% to 25% that season.

At the time, DuMont was paying Gleason \$1,000 a week. CBS offered him eight times that to change networks and to bring “The Honeymooners” with him. “The Jackie Gleason Show” premiered on CBS on June 4, 1949. “The Honeymooners”

13 minutes each — were expanding to 30 minutes or longer and, in some cases, filling up the entire time slot.

In October 1955, CBS decided to go for broke, offering Gleason a three-year contract to produce 78 episodes of “The Honeymooners.” Gleason would get up to \$70,000 per episode for his trouble.

Which is how “The Honeymooners” debuted as a stand-alone sitcom in its fourth year of existence, on Oct. 1, 1955. What CBS hadn’t counted on, however, was that the work of writing, producing and starring on the show was exhausting Gleason.



THE MAKING OF A CLASSIC TV SITCOM

Gleason had the show shot in front of a live audience but wanted the cast to improvise. Therefore, he didn’t attend very many rehearsals. This frustrated his castmates, who learned to give Gleason subtle directions while on camera. When Ralph rubs his tummy, for example — that’s Gleason warning his cast he’s forgotten his next line.



Playing Ralph Kramden’s long-suffering wife, Alice, was Pert Kelton. After one season on DuMont, it was revealed that Kelton’s husband had bought an ad in the Daily Worker in 1948. This caused both of them to be blacklisted as Communist sympathizers. One of Gleason’s first tasks when he moved to CBS, therefore, was to find a new Alice Kramden.



Actor Audrey Meadows auditioned for the part of Alice, but Gleason felt she might be too attractive for the role. When told about this, Meadows had photos taken of herself with no makeup, wearing ratty clothes and with her hair disheveled. Gleason roared with laughter and declared an actor with a sense of humor like that deserved the job.



Fans of the show grew alarmed at the poor living conditions of the Kramdens. They mailed things to Meadows — curtains, potholders, irons — in hopes of improving her kitchen. Ironically, Meadows was the only one of the four cast members to get paid residuals after “The Honeymooners” went into reruns: Her brothers were both show-biz lawyers.



Art Carney was added to the show as the Kramdens’ neighbor, Ed Norton. He walked with a limp after he was wounded in the leg during World War II. The hat he wore on the show was his own — he had bought it for \$5 in 1935. Carney would be nominated for seven Emmy Awards and would win six for he work as Norton.



Gleason hired Joyce Randolph to play Norton’s wife, Trixie, after seeing Randolph in a TV commercial for Clorets. A running gag in the sketches for “The Jackie Gleason Show” was Ralph ribbing Trixie, about her previous career as a burlesque dancer. This was toned down for “The Honeymooners” series.



After one season of the stand alone show, Gleason felt he had exhausted his ideas for plots. He cut a deal with CBS to cancel the show and return to his variety show format for one more season. A decade later, he’d revive “The Jackie Gleason Show” and “The Honeymooners” skits for another four seasons, but with new actors playing Alice and Trixie.



As a new decade dawned, CBS urged Gleason to return full-time to “The Honeymooners” but Gleason insisted on a hybrid format with variety show bits. CBS canceled “The Jackie Gleason Show” in February 1970. From time to time over the next eight years, Gleason would bring “The Honeymooners” back for special episodes and highlight shows.