

# Ralph Kramden and *The Honeymooners* Turn the Big 5 0 (Sort of)

Jackie Gleason still represents a comic reflection of postwar urban America. **By Ron Simon**

**M**any traditions kick off a new year in Manhattan: the dropping of the ball at Times Square, a midnight run in Central Park, and the marathon screening of *The Honeymooners* on local television. As New Yorkers begin to make our resolutions on January 1st, Ralph Kramden is there to let them know that their greatest plans do not always pan out—a reality check for the most confident and audacious. For Ralph and most dreamers, the words of downtrodden wife Alice ring true as a corrective to overindulgent imaginations: “the biggest thing you ever got into was your pants.”

2005 marks the 50th anniversary of one of television’s best-remembered and most resonant comedies. Regular TV watchers know the Kramdens

and their neighbors the Nortons from the one and only season of programs that aired during the 1955-56 season. Hailed as the “classic thirty-nine” by television aficionados, this single season has had perhaps the biggest influence on American TV culture than any other. In syndication or DVD, several generations of viewers have identified with Jackie Gleason’s incarnation of Ralph Kramden, that aggravated bus driver from Brooklyn whose dreams of social and economic mobility never come true. Kramden has also served as the template for all future working-class underdogs on television—Fred Flintstone, Archie Bunker, Roseanne and Homer Simpson.

Actually, it is hard to pin down an actual anniversary date for *The Honeymooners*. Gleason first



*The Honeymooners* (l. to r.) Jackie Gleason, Art Carney, Audrey Meadows and Joyce Randolph

introduced his alter ego five years earlier on his DuMont variety series, *Cavalcade of Stars*. Gleason's original writers, Joe Bigelow and Harry Crane, wanted to call the sketch "The Beasts," but Gleason understood that beneath Ralph's blustery exterior was a good—if flawed—heart. The early *Honeymooners* routines were rooted in a spartan realism: Gleason instructed his writers to "make it the way people really live," and the comedian gave his character the address of his own boyhood residence, 358 Chauncey Street.

I acquired the kinescope of the first *Honeymooners* sketch in the mid-eighties for the then Museum of Broadcasting from the estate of writer Snag Werris. Werris had written jokes for Gleason for many years and supposedly had traded Gleason a bottle of booze for this historic film. I

was then able to date the kinescope by a reference to another Ralph, Ralph Branca of the Brooklyn Dodgers. In his opening monologue Gleason saluted Branca for his bravery in defeat after serving the infamous pitch to Bobby Thomson during the playoff game against the New York Giants two days earlier (inspiring the call "The Giants win the pennant! The Giants win the pennant!"). Like that Ralph, Kramden would suffer frustration and defeat. So October 5, 1951 might be viewed as Ralph Kramden's birthday, but the *Honeymooner* universe was just taking shape.

The first sketch was a verbal battle for supremacy in a minimally furnished apartment, with the original Alice played by a veteran character actress Pert Kelton. These DuMont drafts also gave a stark insight into the demands

and compromises of marriage, offering a kind of kitchen-sink comedy of insult and affection. The six-minute routine, which also featured Art Carney as a policeman, proved so popular that Gleason and his writers created new struggles for the couple. Early on, they added the upstairs neighbors, the Nortons, literally from the lower depths; Carney would be sewer worker Ed Norton throughout *The Honeymooners* run of four decades and the first Trixie would be emerging Broadway actress Elaine Stritch. However, as in the first battle, the beleaguered Kramden would always reconcile with his equally exasperated wife at the end of their travail, prompting the tag line that tugged the heart, "Baby, You're the Greatest!"

A year later, William Paley of CBS lured Gleason and his staff from the impoverished DuMont network; Gleason was given a much larger budget to produce a weekly, live extravaganza on Saturday nights; the show would be moving uptown but the Kramdens would remain in the boroughs. A younger actress, Audrey Meadows, was hired to replace Kelton, who suffered from a combination of heart problems and blacklisting difficulties. In fact, Meadows, who previously worked with Bob and Ray, was seventeen years younger than Kelton, making the *Honeymooner* comedy less harsh and shrewish, but ultimately more touching and compassionate. Gleason had created many memorable characters for his variety series—Joe the Bartender, the Poor Soul, and Reginald Van Gleason III—but the audiences wanted more of the Kramdens. During the first

three years, the *Honeymooner* sketches grew from 10 minutes to over 40. These sketches would become a distant memory until they were rediscovered in the mid-eighties.

### ***The Honeymooners* was among the last of the urban, working-class comedies on fifties television.**

In 1955 the Buick Motor Company offered Gleason six million dollars to produce *The Honeymooners* as a weekly situation comedy for two years. The corpulent comedian formed his own production company and used a new film/video technology, the Electronicam process, to record the series live on film. The Electronicam system was developed by Gleason's old employer DuMont and consisted of a film and video camera sharing the same lens. This version of *The Honeymooners* was shot twice a week before an audience of 1,100 people. During the first season Gleason was disturbed by the amount of rehearsal time and felt that these recorded episodes lacked the spontaneity and originality of the live sketches. He was also nervous that his show was being tied in the ratings by a new hot singer who might be described as the anti-Gleason, the very laid-back Perry Como. He discontinued the series after 39 programs and decided to return to the live, variety format. Disappointed with the whole experience, he later sold the films and syndication rights to CBS for a million and half-dollars, a bad financial decision that a Ralph Kramden might have transacted.

*The Honeymooners* was among the last of the urban, working-class comedies on fifties television. As the nation experienced postwar prosperity,

so did the families on television. The Nelsons (*The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriett*), the Andersons (*Father Knows Best*), and the Cleavers (*Leave It to Beaver*) lived in the tree-lined secure, suburbs, all enjoying the material emblems of the American dream. By 1955, even the prototypical proletariat family, the Goldbergs, had moved out of the city, from the Bronx to suburban bliss of Haverville. The Kramdens were the exception. Ralph and his suffering wife, Alice, were stuck in the urban wilderness—a cold-water apartment above a noisy, New York street, without any creature comforts of Eisenhower conformity. Their main possessions were a plain dining table and a depression icebox. They shared these lower-class frustrations with their disconsolate neighbors, the Nortons. Ever slow-witted Ed continued to work in the grimy sewers, while his wife Trixie, played by Joyce Randolph since 1952, regularly commiserated with Alice about their common hardships.

Materially and spiritually, the Kramdens and the Nortons were out of sync with their suburban counterparts. The couples were childless in a baby boom USA, although Ralph and Ed often resembled irresponsible teenagers. The two icons of fifties America, the car and the home, were absent from Honeymoonerland. In the first filmed episode, broadcast on October 1, 1955, the Nortons and Kramdens debated the cost of owning a television set. By that time, more than half the country had made the purchase with an even greater percentage of TV families taking the electronic leap into the future. Much of *The Honeymooners* comedy revolved around the couples trying to get rich quick with Ralph constantly conning

the gullible Ed into one scheme after another. In the classic episode, “Better Living Through Television,” Ed and Ralph appear in a live television commercial to sell Happy Housewife Helpers as the Chef of the Past and the Chef of the Future respectively. The helper went over as well as such past ideas as wallpaper that glows in the dark and no-cal pizza. The yearning to escape near poverty reflected the dreams of Jackie’s own adolescence. Gleason implicitly understood that if his working class comedy wasn’t credible, “nobody’s going to laugh.”

Sketches about *The Honeymooners* remained a prominent part of Gleason’s succeeding television series with the writers trying to do something unusual with the trusted material. During the 1956-7 season of *The Jackie Gleason Show*, the Kramdens and the Nortons took a live trip to Europe, replete with musical numbers. At the end of the season, Carney left the series, and Gleason did not revive the sketch until his sixties extravaganza, *The American Scene Magazine*. When Carney was available, Gleason revived the sketch on videotape, often with new cast members. Sue Ane Langdon and later Sheila MacRae played Alice, while Patricia Wilson and Jean Kean were recruited for Trixie. During the 1966-67 season, the “Great One” even decided to remake the “Trip to Europe” musicals into color spectacles, bubbling with 40 new numbers. Despite the permutations, the familiar catchphrases remained. Who doesn’t know Ralph’s stock phrases to Alice: “One of these days. . . Pow! Right in the kisser!;” “Bang! Zoom;” and “To the moon.” (Although these lines suggest an elemental rage, feminists have embraced Alice as a

strong character for her handling of Ralph's temper tantrums.) And Ed's greeting to Kramden became a classic line of fellowship: "Hiya there, Ralphie boy."

After his variety series ended in 1970, Gleason produced four more *Honeymooner* specials with Carney and the returning Meadows. Till the bitter end, the couple remained in their Bensonhurst digs; changing mores would not affect the Kramden's lifestyle. Despite color and reunions, Ralph and Alice remained fixed in the popular imagination because the thirty-nine episodes of *The Honeymooners*, broadcast in lowly black and white, were a perennial success in syndication. For over 20 years a local station in Manhattan played them every night, resulting in an avid cult following. The ritualistic themes and incantatory dialogue inspired the formation of the club RALPH (Royal Association for the Longevity and Preservation of the Honeymooners).

### **Finding these *Honeymooners* kinescopes was equivalent to the discovery of King Tut's tomb.**

But the preservation of the complete *Honeymooner* oeuvre came about almost by complete accident. Working with a CBS archivist, I was able to locate four kinescopes of live *Honeymooners* in the network's vault in New Jersey. These unseen live sketches created great exultation, almost TV's equivalent to discovering the tomb of King Tut. Crowds lined around the block to expand their *Honeymooner* knowledge. The Museum was besieged by calls from distributors and cable services

about acquiring these rarities. As the hysteria built, Jackie Gleason, always with impeccable timing, revealed that he had most of the live sketches from his CBS series in a Miami vault. His "lost" episodes soon found an afterlife on cable and the home-video market. The idea of lost anything in television soon took on a mystique, and became a powerful marketing tool. Ralph Kramden had finally struck it rich.

Why does *The Honeymooners* still speak to the 21st century while other fifties phenomena, such as hula hoops and David Crockett caps, have been relegated to Ebay's dustbin? No program in the history of television has been seen in so many incarnations: aired live, on film and tape; in black-and-white and color; as sketch comedy, situation comedy, and musical, succeeding on network, syndicated, and cable television as well as home video and DVD. And the lead character didn't even have a TV! Generations of viewers, cutting across lines of race and

class, have found profound meaning in the show's relative simplicity. Earlier this year an African-American version of *The Honeymooners* was theatrically released. The

star of the film, Cedric the Entertainer, acknowledged Ralph's appeal universal: "He's a little bit gruff, and he can be tough on his friends, but Ralph is lovable because he is Everyman." But this second honeymoon proved rocky: critics lauded the original once again, but questioned the need for an update.

Fifty years on, *The Honeymooners* remains a comic reflection of postwar urban America, with Ralph Kramden epitomizing the ardent but misguided believer in personal advancement.

The search for the American Dream had turned Arthur Miller's salesman, Willy Loman, into a tragic hero; the same quest made Ralph into a comic archetype. Like Jack Benny, Gleason realized that we love to identify with our failings. Even downtown hipsters have embraced those regular guys from Brooklyn. *Village Voice* critic J. Hoberman writes "these days, urban

sophisticates are apt to appreciate *The Honeymooners* for its beatnik poverty and minimalist aesthetic." At its best, *The Honeymooners* seems authentic and real, with Gleason projecting an in-your-face immediacy of frustration and desperation. He continues to yell to that inner Ralph in us all. Happy birthday, Ralph. Your shoes and pants will be hard to fill.

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