

Edie and Ernie

By Richard Peterson

"Oh, it *has* been so long since we've seen each other over the orthicon tube."

— Percy Dovetonsils

Ernie Kovacs explored the outer limits of television comedy long before "edge" became a Hollywood commodity. From 1950 until his tragic death in 1962 at the age of forty-two, he transformed the television studio into a magic toy shop where technology, illusion and culture — high and low — ran a collision course that transfixed home audiences and often baffled network executives.

His toy shop's inventory included bizarre visual gags set to "Mack the Knife" in German and punctuated by the music's jagged patterns on an oscilloscope; the choreography of everyday objects to the 1812 Overture or Esquivel's "space age" pop arrangements; voiceless commercials for Dutch Masters cigars accompanied by a Haydn string quartet; his silent "Eugene" character roaming a world that defied scientific law; and Kovacs himself, cigar in hand, inviting his viewers into the television control booth. And there were his outrageous characters — French storyteller Pierre Ragout, Hungarian chef Miklos Molnar, simpering "poet laureate" Percy Dovetonsils, and the Nairobi Trio, an enigmatic music-box combo attired in derbies, overcoats and rubber ape masks.

Kovacs began his television career in Philadelphia in 1950, following a decade as radio host and newspaper columnist in his native Trenton, New Jersey. In 1951 he hired Edie Adams as the "girl singer" for his live shows, which were often scheduled in a grueling succession of day and evening time slots. In 1952 they moved to New York, where Ernie solidified his national reputation and Edie built a Broadway career with leads in musicals such as *Wonderful Town* and *Li'l Abner*. They married in 1954 and eventually moved to Hollywood.

"In the early days, there was no producer, no assistant director, just us," Edie Adams recalled during a recent phone interview. "There weren't many people in the control room, and if Joe had to go

to the john, well, one of us had to push those buttons. I'd get on the camera and I'd manually put Ernie in focus and out of focus — anything we could use to kill time — and people were fascinated by it."

With classical training from the Juilliard School, Edie introduced Ernie to serious music, but she also had to learn the popular '50s songs as she went along. Working with Ernie and his miniscule

budgets in those early days was also a crash course in improvisational comedy.

"I had to bring something in, because he was giving me more and more time to kill. I'd do Marilyn Monroe singing Schubert *lieder* — that would always kill five minutes — or Zsa Zsa Gabor doing Shakespeare, and I could write all that myself, just pick up the book and make people laugh — and he did put me on to that."

Most comedy in the "Golden Age" of live television had roots in the sketch and stand-up formats of vaudeville. Ernie



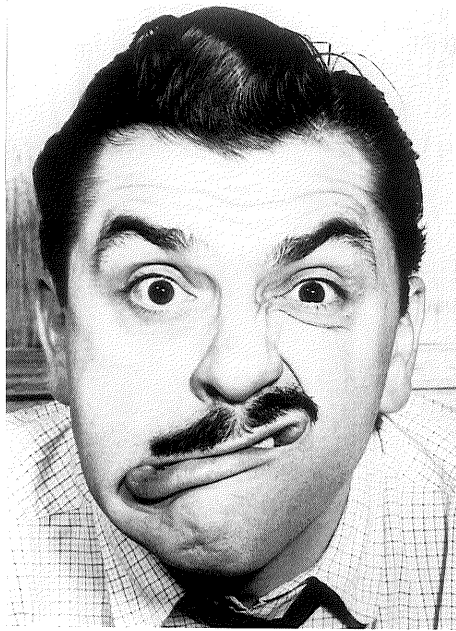
went for something different, using the limited capacities of the camera to reverse the image, freeze the frame, or turn it upside down. When increasing popularity and the advent of videotape allowed him more formal control and better special effects, he never discarded the casual, intimate presence he had originally nurtured. Even the titles of some of his earliest shows — *Ernie in Kovacsland*, *Kovacs on the Corner* and *Kovacs Unlimited* — seemed not to promise an individual performer so much as a singular world view.

“Ernie prided himself on the fact that he didn’t know how to tell a joke,” says Edie. “But he could take something on and really make you laugh. It was cerebral. Nobody got dressed up to come and see us, it wasn’t a nightclub, it wasn’t a movie. He said, ‘they’re sitting there in their underwear, and they better darn well like you, to have you in their house.’ He would say things like, ‘don’t talk to any more than two people,’ and ‘the screen is twelve inches wide, and it’s across the room — so you have to be specific.’”

Edie’s favorite routine involves an armor-clad Ernie in a dramatic monologue as King Menelaus of Sparta. “He’d go, and you’d start to laugh, and he’d keep going and you said, ‘Gee, he’s not a bad actor!’ And he’d still keep going, and just when you were hooked in, he would do this shuffle-off-to-Buffalo. It was a long, long set-up — I loved that.”

His shows progressively intensified our sense of a “Kovacsian” world as they evolved into planned studio productions where he could casually pace the set or appear with his technicians in the control room. “He involved the crew,” says Edie. “He knocked down the fourth wall, essentially. And it was a kind of television that wasn’t seen.”

Along with a self-mocking side that surfaced in his improvised comic characters, he displayed a dark sense of humor and a penchant for fantastic twists. A lecturer’s pointer could touch a painting of a dam and unleash a deluge. A friendly car dealer would slap his product and propel it underground. A rifle-range target could fire back, and an irate viewer could assassinate the obnoxious person in his televi-



sion set. This “funhouse-meets-twilight-zone” sensibility also informed elaborate conceptual and abstract pieces set to music.

While his Hollywood years also brought several conventional movie roles, Ernie Kovacs continued to excel as a television *auteur* who anticipated future developments in video and performance art, music video motifs, self-referential comedy and television with an “edge.”

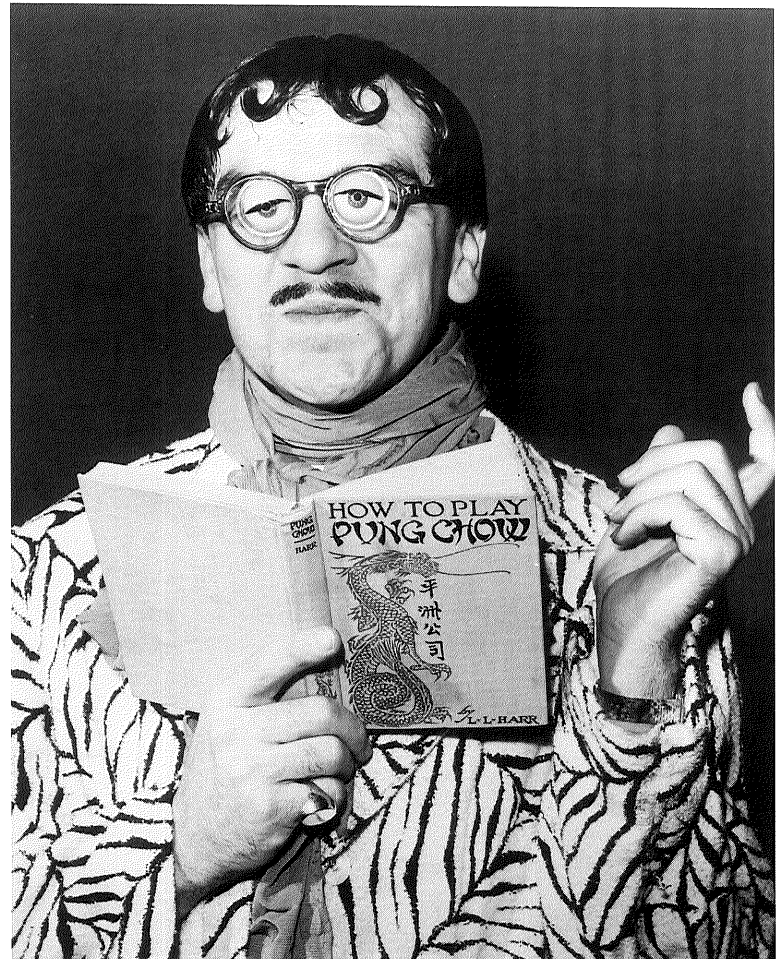
Edie Adams mentions two appearances she made in recent years on Garry Shandling’s innovative series, *The Larry Sanders Show*: “All the writers were such Kovacs fans. They wanted to hear about everything he did, and in

rehearsal we would talk and talk and talk.”

While continuing an acting career, Edie is also a passionate historian and has cooperated with major archives to rescue several Kovacs shows that would have deteriorated, due to institutional neglect and the fragile nature of obsolete video formats. Restorations-in-progress include Ernie’s original, live “Eugene” broadcast, which was his only color television production, and sixty episodes of their virtually unseen (and genially demented) quiz show, *Take a Good Look*.

“Had he lived, he would have been making movies. He would have been behind the camera and done some *way out-there* stuff. And had he been in the computer age, he’d have never come out,” Edie laughs. “You’d never get him away from that computer.”

Richard Peterson is program director of the Rafael Film Center.



Percy Dovetonsils