

AT CANTER'S WITH KOVACS: AN INTERVIEW

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No one knew where to find him. Thoroughly unlisted and well below the public radar, I never figured that I'd score an interview with Ernie Kovacs. A household name way back when, Kovacs stood straight up and walked right out of the spotlight in 1962. He simply stopped producing his popular television broadcasts without providing any reason or rationale. *Poof, smoke*, he was gone; Ernie had pulled the best disappearing act in showbiz history. While Kovacs may remain a hazy, half-remembered name for most, his legacy is indisputable as a certified cult hero and a canonized TV pioneer. Quite strangely, however, his current whereabouts are largely unknown. It took copious research and a friend of a friend—who is a personal assistant to a powerful talent agent in LA—to dig up an address. Of course, the 10 million dollar question here is: What has Ernie been doing for the last forty-five plus years?

Born in 1919 to immigrant Hungarians in Trenton, New Jersey, the precocious Kovacs performed in Catskills summer stock in the late '30s and became an award-winning journalist for *The Trentonian* in the early '40s. Armed with an absurd sense of humor and an uncanny ability to ad-lib, Ernie made the transition to radio as DJ and Special Events Director at WTTM Radio in 1946. A popular host with a number of programs under his belt, Kovacs arrived in Philadelphia in 1950 for his first TV audition wearing only a barrel. Needless to say, he got the gig. Soon thereafter, Ernie (and his ever-present cigar) began assaulting the airwaves with a nonstop barrage of nutty non sequiturs, musical interludes, and cartoonish sight gags. His wild run of shows introduced countless camera tricks and studio techniques that are now considered staples of the medium.

The '50s was all about television, and Ernie hosted, devised, and directed shows on all four of the networks. He even hosted the first TV morning wake-up program. The Kovacs universe included a cast and crew of characters (most played by Ernie along with wife Edie Adams), complicated set pieces, purely musical skits without dialogue, and all other manners of pure delirium. An average show

likely included one or all of the following: close-ups of oscilloscopes punctuated by blackout gags, monologues spoken directly to the fourth wall, and recurring characters such as the gorilla-suited Nairobi Trio, the German DJ Wolfgang Sauerbraten, and, of course, Percy Dovetonsils, the rhyming poet with a serious lisp. Even though Kovacs essentially tossed off his shows on a daily basis, these were all works conceived and created only with the possibility of the TV studio. Using the tools at hand—and breaking the rules at all times—Kovacs made anarchic, innovative programs that remain weird and wonderful today. His experiments were arguably the first conscious attempt to make video art, albeit for the burgeoning living room audience rather than gallery patrons.

To be perfectly honest, I'm not sure why Kovacs broke his silence to meet with me. People have been pressing him to speak for years. I'm fairly positive that he had never heard of *North Drive Press*, so I doubt those credentials had any influence. As it goes, I doggedly mailed eight letters over the course of five months before receiving a reply.

In a letter written and sent on May 15—the one that finally got his attention—I suggested that we eat lunch at Canter's Deli. I mentioned this spot only because the friend of my friend said that many elderly Hollywood stars liked to dine there. On May 20, I received a note from Kovacs that informed me he would be free for lunch at noon on June 5. I immediately cleared my schedule, arranged the trip, and MapQuested the route from my hotel to Canter's. I had included my phone number in all the letters but was nevertheless stunned to hear Ernie's unmistakable voice on the other end of the line a few days later: "I eat at Canter's nearly everyday or else the kid delivers it. Canter's keeps me alive. I'd be nothing without that soup."

What follows is a transcription of our lunch meeting. For the record, Kovacs ate tongue with mustard on rye, three half-sour pickles, a pickled tomato, and a whole bowl of consommé with kasha. His appetite was voracious. At first, Ernie didn't want me to tape the conversation, partly, I suspect, because he didn't trust the digital recorder that I had brought. "It doesn't use tape," he complained. After I proved to him that it worked, he finally consented to a conversation.

ERNIE: Did you see me in *Operation Madball*?

ANDREW: I tried, really, but it's completely unavailable on DVD or even VHS. I went to a few stores and looked around for it online.

ERNIE: Now that was some picture. We had Dick Quine directing and Charles Lawton Jr., who worked with

Welles on *Lady From Shanghai*, on camera. You know, they billed me over Rooney? Boy, that got his goat all right. He never liked tall people too much; you could say Mick had a big chip on his miniature shoulder. One day during lunch, Dick York and I were horsing around when a full-fledged food fight broke out there on the back lot. Well, as these things tend to go, no one is safe. And next thing I know, Mick's got a bowl of grits on his face and flapjacks in his pants. He had an awfully big mouth for such a runt. Does that little bugger still grace us with his presence?

ANDREW: Do you mean is he alive?

ERNIE: Do you want that I should repeat myself?

ANDREW: I think he is alive. I don't remember reading an obituary or hearing anything. For some reason I always read the obits first in *The New York Times*. The most interesting people die everyday.

ERNIE: Thanks for reminding me, kid. I'm not getting any younger, you know. And this lunch is taking forever.

ANDREW: No, no, I didn't mean anything. I guess I was trying to say that—

ERNIE: It was a joke, relax. Quine, so sad, he suicided, speaking of pushing up daisies.

ANDREW: Richard Quine?

ERNIE: Yeah. We did four pictures together. He was good on the set, knew how to get the crew up and running. Had a light touch, a helluva team leader.

ANDREW: There was another guy named Richard Quine, a guitar player. He also suicided. What a weird coincidence.

ERNIE: You know a Richard Quine who suicided? There were two? What could be the odds of that? This other Quine, what kind of music did he play?

ANDREW: Um, well, he played a lot with a guy named Richard Hell. He was in the Voidoids. They were a big band in the original New York punk scene. He played with a bunch of people, actually. I'm a great admirer of him.

ERNIE: Original New York what? Some big band that must have been! I'm sure they must've been tough com-

petition for Benny Goodman and his boys. One thing I can say about Richard Quine is that we listened when he spoke. There was always a great deal of respect for his authority on the set from the cast, union, and crew. He never needed to raise his voice, not like Merv Leroy. He and Jacky got into a vicious fight on that picture, the one at Fox.

PODNP: Jacky? Who?

ERNIE: Yeah, Jacky Warden. A bunch of us used to eat here together, over in that booth. It used to be all the fellas. This is back when Jacky was married to Vanda, who is a French stage actress. They've been separated for years now.

ANDREW: Jack Warden? Actually, he passed away last year.

ERNIE: Jacky? No, you don't say.

ANDREW: I'm sorry.

ERNIE: He was in his prime...that man was solid as a rock. He was a paratrooper. Did you know that? Jacky fought in the Battle of the Bulge. I think he broke his leg. You don't see it on screen, but he limped.

ANDREW: Wow, I know nothing about his personal life. He's great in *12 Angry Men*. I also liked him on the show *Crazy Like a Fox*.

ERNIE: You ever see our picture, *Wake Me When It's Over*?

ANDREW: No, I haven't. I wanted to see all of your work to prepare for our lunch, but I couldn't. And it isn't on DVD.

ERNIE: What a cast we had there. Besides yours truly as the dashing lead and Jacky, there was Donny Knotts and Dick Shawn. We were a real cut-up crew, always stepping on lines, mugging around, and stealing each others' scenes. Merv was pulling his hair out—or what was left of it anyway—trying to cope with our shenanigans. I was there the morning he threw Warden into a full-length mirror. The thing is, we'd been playing poker late the night before, Jacky was down by maybe \$700. He drank, man did he drink, and was two hours late to the 6:30 call. Leroy sent a kid to get him from his trailer, but the kid comes back and says that Mr. Warden won't budge. I can still see the steam coming out of Merv's

ears. [He laughs.] Now, I didn't actually witness what happened inside, but I did watch Merv walk right into Jacky's trailer without knocking on the door. A couple minutes later, an ambulance pulls up, opens the door, and the guys go in. Fifteen minutes later, everyone walks out like nothing just happened, except Warden's right hand is in thick bandages and his head is bleeding. He told me that Merv reached into his bunk, hoisted him up, and flung him into the six-foot tall mirror. It cracked, right along with Merv's mind.

ANDREW: When you were working on TV, you often directed the shows. Did you ever have to get tough with anyone?

ERNIE: Me? Come on, I was a pussycat. Sure, I got hot under the collar, but you gotta let it roll off of you in this business. You learn that fast or else you are out on your fanny. One day this guy is a bastard, your worst enemy, and the next day he is your boss. So what you do to him as your nemesis will revisit you like a sack of hammers to the head when he has the upper hand. Was I a pain, did you ask?

ANDREW: Yeah.

ERNIE: Sure, but we all are at times. I didn't make friends with everyone, and I can tell you that management and I had many, many disagreements. No matter what, I always treated everyone on my productions with the same level of respect and dignity. I used to hear talk from the guys on the various sets and crews around town about that arrogant sad sack, Miltie Berle. Now that he's dead, I can safely say he was one of God's biggest botch jobs. Miltie's temper was quick, and boy was it nasty. Watching him taught me very fast that earning respect has nothing to do with blowing your top at people. There is no need whatsoever to take out one's own anger issues on the help. Berle had a fourteen-inch schlong and no talent whatsoever—big deal. He still had to pay for his whores.

ANDREW: I take it you two didn't get along.

ERNIE: You can put two and two together.

ANDREW: Can you describe your early days as an actor?

ERNIE: I was lousy—phew. You should've seen me in *Macbeth*. You would've been the only one. I stunk. A critic said that I was a—and this is a quote—"vaudevillian rather than legitimate actor." Remembering my

lines was always the toughest part, so I'd adlib here and there, throw in a line to get myself through the scene. I'd hide scribbled dialogue all around the set. What I had going for me was that I could make people laugh without really trying. They'd be howling before I even opened my mouth and flubbed my line. Body language is the only essential tool when it comes to comedy. A funny face will always get people laughing, and it can save you. If you don't know how to use your face, then you are dead in comedy. And in drama, too.

ANDREW: What was it about TV that first excited you?

ERNIE: Money. Fame. The prestige. Beautiful women. Getting my face on all those tubes in all those homes. I wanted the stars and I reached for them. They paid me to be me, which is a dream job for any guy. My abundance of energy back then was perfect for killing what would otherwise have been dead airtime. You have to remember that there were very few shows and only a couple of channels. We didn't have cable, satellites, none of that stuff. I began in the local market, but when I hit the national slots, my pucker appeared in homes all across the country. I like to make people happy, what can I say?

ANDREW: Well that is easy to understand. Do you know what it was that attracted you to playing with video and the parameters of television?

ERNIE: I don't analyze what I did or why I did it. For me, it all happened naturally. Ideas come to me at funny times. They almost strike like lightning. In front of the camera, I was often inspired. Good gags got my engine going. I went in with a full picture of what I wanted to do, so my real job was figuring out a way to make reality match my daydream. That's a tough job. It required a lot of time playing with the equipment. Experimenting in the studio was mandatory on my shows. The more I fooled around, the better I became with all the gadgets. I started thinking with all those button and switches in mind. Once I understood the technology, I knew how to extend it, push it more in my direction. But at the time, I probably didn't think about it like that. I didn't have a philosophical approach. Truth be told, I made those shows primarily for myself because I knew that if there was ever only one person left who would watch them, that it'd be me. I'm my own best audience, so I like to make work that I can enjoy. If I like it, then I think that my audience will, too. Did you see my silent show? The one where I play a character called Eugene?

ANDREW: I love that one. I have it on tape. It is amazing that you were able to do an entire program basically live for tape without any dialogue. That must have been so radical. It doesn't even seem American, more like what I imagine one might have seen on European television or in a Jacques Tati film.

ERNIE: Some people thought their TV sets were busted. We got complaints at the station. I wanted all the commercials to run silent, to keep with my concept, but NBC balked. I fought them, didn't give up an inch, but that didn't stop me from losing. It's their station. A few of them ran silent, which I still think is pretty good.

ANDREW: Most definitely. I was wondering, do you use the Internet at all?

ERNIE: The Internet? My grandkids play with one of those, but I'm old-fashioned. Give me a newspaper to read, or a good book. You should see how many years of *New Yorkers* I have stacked up in the bathroom.

ANDREW: Have you ever tried it?

ERNIE: I've never really paid it two cents.

ANDREW: So you don't know about YouTube? I was going to ask you what you thought about the idea of people making their own television shows.

ERNIE: I don't watch much television. After Carson left the air I pretty much lost interest. I hosted *The Tonight Show*, did you know that?

ANDREW: I did, although again I can't find any footage of it.

ERNIE: I'll tell you what it was *not* like, and that is James [Jay] Leno. They should have never given the seat to him. That Letterman would have been a much better replacement. They have him now on CBS. Tell me, what are these new shows like? Which of the networks are they on?

ANDREW: No, it doesn't really work like that. On the Internet, there is a thing called YouTube, where anyone who has a video can post it for everyone to see.

ERNIE: What are they posting? I thought this was TV, not a tube. What does posting have to do with it?

ANDREW: Posting means broadcasting. It's basically a way to say that people are broadcasting their own amateur

productions. Most of the time there aren't sets or stages. Shows are performed in front of tiny cameras attached to computers in people's bedrooms.

ERNIE: You mean dirty movies? Please, they've been putting cameras into bedrooms for years. That doesn't sound so new to me. I've seen plenty of stag films, thank you very much.

ANDREW: Well, yeah, there are dirty movies. People are making those, but that isn't what I was thinking of. I meant more, like, comedy-skit shows and stuff with zany humor. You can use your computer to watch them at anytime.

ERNIE: You've lost me.

ANDREW: I guess I won't ask that question then.

ERNIE: Too late. Now, while you aren't talking, can I ask you a question, Andrew?

ANDREW: Please.

ERNIE: Are you going to ask me what I've been doing all this time?

ANDREW: I was building up to that.

ERNIE: I was waiting for you to stop beating around the bush already. Here we go and I've barely eaten. The story is that in 1962, Bill Paley and I met for lunch at the Russian Tea Room on Fifty-Seventh Street. He wanted to put me into a contract with CBS, he wanted to sign me up for a variety show. Nothing could have bored me more, but I was interested in the job, mostly for the money. Right around that time, I had hit a snag in my poker game; the cards were against me. But I didn't like the terms he offered. We ended up going back and forth for weeks, and weeks turned into a couple of months. He scared all the other networks away from me, made threats to them about trying to scoop me away from him. I couldn't get him to pay me a decent salary, and everyone else was too frightened to make me a good offer. It was ridiculous.

ANDREW: You were trapped.

ERNIE: Bill was powerful and mean, the most competitive man I ever met. He was tight with Nixon, if that tells you anything about his valiant demeanor. I finally got him on the phone after screaming my way through his phalanx of secretaries. I told him that I was sick of

playing these games. He said, "Yeah, well, there is one way to stop playing the game." He was absolutely right. I had an epiphany. There was only one way not to play the game, so I told him what he could do with himself in no uncertain terms.

ANDREW: Oh shit.

ERNIE: Yup, and I stepped right in it. You better believe it. The last thing he said to me was that I'd never work in this town again. Mind you, he was in New York and I was in Los Angeles, but I got the point.

ANDREW: Were you blacklisted?

ERNIE: In a way, yes, but not for my political belief, not like Abe Polonsky and those other guys. What happened is people stopped taking my calls. I got the cold shoulder all around town. I still had my buddies, but none of them were network chiefs, and I didn't want the work that they could get me. Paley left me to dangle. I was a cold potato for years. Every once in a while, a situation would develop, I would get an offer, nothing worth doing, public television and all that. After a few years of sitting around the house, I think my DNA changed. I became a different person. The rigmarole of TV didn't seem so appealing anymore. I had my cards to play and a few books to write. I have many manuscripts. I wrote a sequel to my novel *Zoomar*. You ever read that?

ANDREW: Yes, I have. I found a totally dingy, beat-up copy in Chinatown a few years ago.

ERNIE: In Chinatown? What did you pay?

ANDREW: Nothing. I saw it in the trash.

ERNIE: Oh, my wounded pride. You picked it out of the garbage.

ANDREW: No, not exactly. I didn't mean it like that.

ERNIE: Kid, you gotta learn to take a joke.

ANDREW: So, really what you are saying is that you left TV because the offers that did come along weren't interesting enough and you had other things to do?

ERNIE: More or less, yes. Why get stuck doing something for your whole life? I grew up in the Depression. You gotta roll with the punches, you can't let the well run dry.

ANDREW: I think the general assumption has always been that you walked away. The biography *Kovacsland* doesn't go into this story.

ERNIE: What is there to go into? That was a long time ago. I'm a relic, who really cares? It isn't something I like to dwell on, let's say that.

ANDREW: Have you ever felt like you wanted to be back on television or in the movies, if the circumstances were right?

ERNIE: Not interested. Those pickles interest me more at the moment. Pass them over here.

With that, Kovacs managed to steer the conversation away from anything worth transcribing. We discussed the merits of sour versus half-sour pickles (he prefers the latter, as do I, but we could not agree on the merits of the pickled tomato). Ernie became very enthusiastic when we started talking about soup. He loves a thick split-pea soup, and he assured me that Canter's has the best in Los Angeles. ■