

The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour



The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour was a groundbreaking television variety show that aired on CBS from 1967 to 1969. It featured the comedic duo of Tom and Dick Smothers, who were not only brothers but also talented performers who brought a unique blend of humor, music, and social commentary to the small screen. The show became known for its edgy material that often challenged societal norms and politics, making it a significant part of American pop culture during its run. This article will explore the origins of the Smothers Brothers, the structure of their show, key moments, controversies, and their lasting impact on television.

Origins of the Smothers Brothers

Early Life and Career

Tom and Dick Smothers were born into a musical family. Their father, a military officer, encouraged them to pursue music from an early age. The brothers began performing folk music in coffeehouses during the early 1960s, where they quickly gained popularity. Their comedic banter and ability to blend serious topics with humor set them apart from other musical acts of the time.

- Tom Smothers: The older brother, known for his witty and often satirical style, played the guitar and was the more outspoken of the duo.
- Dick Smothers: The younger brother, who played the bass guitar, often took on the role of the straight man, countering Tom's antics with his innocent demeanor.

Their musical performances were intertwined with comedic sketches, leading to opportunities in television. They first appeared on "The Tonight Show" and in various television specials before landing their own show.

Development of The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour

In 1967, CBS decided to create a variety show featuring the Smothers Brothers. The network was looking for a fresh format that could appeal to the younger audience of the time. The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour premiered on February 5, 1967, and it quickly became a hit.

- Format: The show featured a mix of musical performances, comedy sketches, and guest appearances. Each episode typically included:
 - Musical performances by the brothers and guest artists
 - Comedy sketches that tackled current events and societal issues
 - Stand-up routines and monologues
 - Interaction with the audience and guests

The show's unique format allowed for a blend of humor and music, making it appealing to a wide audience and setting the stage for future variety shows.

Key Features of the Show

Musical Guests

One of the most significant aspects of The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour was its roster of musical guests. The show featured some of the biggest names in music at the time, including:

- The Who
- Janis Joplin
- Johnny Cash
- Simon & Garfunkel
- Stevie Wonder

The Smothers Brothers showcased not only mainstream artists but also those who were emerging and representing counterculture, making the show a platform for diverse musical expression.

Political and Social Commentary

What set The Smothers Brothers apart from other variety shows was their willingness to address political and social issues directly. They often incorporated satire that challenged the establishment and questioned authority. Some notable topics included:

- The Vietnam War: The Smothers Brothers frequently criticized U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War, using humor to express their dissent.
- Civil Rights: They highlighted civil rights issues, showcasing artists and comedians who were part of the movement.
- Censorship: Their show became a battleground for censorship, as CBS often edited out segments that were deemed too controversial.

Their willingness to tackle these subjects resonated with a generation that was beginning to question traditional values and seek social change.

Controversies and Censorship

The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour faced significant challenges due to its controversial content. CBS executives frequently clashed with the brothers over what could and could not be aired. Some major incidents included:

1. **Censorship of Content:** CBS often edited sketches that criticized the government or the Vietnam War. The brothers pushed back against these edits, leading to tensions between them and the network.
2. **Guest Cancellations:** Some musical guests were pulled from the show due to their political views or the content of their performances. This often led to public outcry and furthered the perception of censorship.
3. **Cancellation:** Ultimately, CBS canceled the show in 1969, citing low ratings, but many believe the cancellation was due to the network's discomfort with the brothers' controversial topics. The final episode aired on April 4, 1969.

Legacy of The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour

Influence on Future Shows

The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour paved the way for future television programs that blended comedy with social commentary. Its legacy can be seen in various shows, including:

- **Saturday Night Live:** SNL adopted the format of live sketches, musical performances, and political satire, heavily influenced by the Smothers Brothers' approach.
- **The Daily Show:** This show echoes the Smothers Brothers' style of merging humor with critical commentary on current events.
- **Comedy Central's Indecision:** Shows that focus on political humor and satire owe a debt to the Smothers Brothers' willingness to tackle difficult subjects.

Revival and Reunion

The Smothers Brothers continued to perform together after the cancellation of their show. They reunited for various television specials and live performances throughout the years, including:

- **The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour: The Reunion** in 1980, which brought back some of the original cast and sketches.
- **Touring:** They remained active in the entertainment industry, performing in theaters and making

guest appearances on various shows.

Their comedic style still resonates today, with many comedians citing them as inspirational figures in their careers.

Recognition and Awards

Over the years, The Smothers Brothers have received numerous awards and accolades for their contributions to comedy and television. Some notable recognitions include:

- Emmy Awards: The show received several nominations and won Emmy Awards for its innovative approach to comedy.
- Hollywood Walk of Fame Star: In recognition of their impact on entertainment, the Smothers Brothers received a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.

Conclusion

The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour was more than just a variety show; it was a cultural phenomenon that pushed the boundaries of television comedy. Through their unique blend of music, humor, and political commentary, Tom and Dick Smothers provided a voice for a generation yearning for change. Their willingness to address controversial topics and challenge societal norms set a precedent for future comedians and variety shows. The legacy of the Smothers Brothers continues to influence the landscape of comedy, ensuring that their contributions to television will not be forgotten.

Frequently Asked Questions

What was the premise of 'The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour'?

The show featured the musical and comedic talents of brothers Tom and Dick Smothers, blending sketch comedy, musical performances, and political satire.

When did 'The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour' originally air?

The show originally aired on CBS from February 1967 to April 1969.

Why was 'The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour' controversial?

The show was controversial due to its political satire and commentary on social issues, which led to clashes with CBS executives over censorship and content.

Who were some notable guest stars on 'The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour'?

Notable guest stars included Joan Baez, George Carlin, Johnny Cash, and Bob Dylan, among others.

What impact did 'The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour' have on television comedy?

The show is credited with paving the way for more progressive and socially aware comedy on television, influencing future comedy programs and late-night shows.

How did the Smothers Brothers incorporate music into their comedy?

They often performed folk music and parodied popular songs, using music as a vehicle to deliver comedic and political messages.

What led to the cancellation of 'The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour'?

The show was canceled after its third season due to ongoing conflicts with CBS over content, particularly regarding its political material.

What legacy has 'The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour' left behind?

The show is remembered as a groundbreaking program that challenged the norms of television comedy and opened doors for more expressive and provocative content in the entertainment industry.

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