

THE *Lucy* TEAM

The creative forces — actors, writers, producers and directors — worked collaboratively to bring America’s favorite TV show to life.

BY ELISA JORDAN

When *I Love Lucy* was first broadcast, millions of Americans were introduced to four characters that soon became like family members — Ricky and Lucy Ricardo and their landlords and best friends, Fred and Ethel Mertz. Since then, the sitcom has entertained generations and shows no signs of going away any time soon.

The four cast members — Lucille Ball, Desi Arnaz, Vivian Vance and William Frawley — made the show look effortless, but it took an entire team of talented people collaborating every week to bring Lucy Ricardo’s wacky adventures into American homes.

RADIO ROOTS

The roots of *I Love Lucy* started with the CBS radio show *My Favorite Husband* (1948 to 1951). The show starred Lucille Ball and Richard Denning as a well-to-do couple, but when writers Jess Oppenheimer, Bob Carroll Jr. and Madelyn Pugh came aboard, the trio reworked the premise and turned the fictional George and Liz Cooper into a middle-class couple to make them more accessible to listeners. The concept worked, and CBS decided to bring the show to television.

“TV was going to be the ‘next big thing,’” said cultural and Hollywood historian Amy Condit, who has contributed to “Film Noir Fanatics” segments on Turner Classic Movies and documentaries on Walt Disney and Buster Keaton. “From 1949 to 1950, the number of television sets in existence quadrupled





William Frawley, Vivian Vance, Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz pose with the crew that brought *I Love Lucy* to life each week.

Three Bobs and a Babe

During the 1955 to 1956 season, Bob Carroll and Madelyn Pugh were joined by two more writers. They also both happened to share the same first name as Carroll, and they were at one point jokingly referred to as “three Bobs and a babe.”

“Bob Schiller and Bob Weiskopf joined the series ... and wrote for the final two seasons of the half-hour shows and all the way through the Lucy-Desi hour specials, which ended in 1960,” said Tom Gilbert, co-author of *Desilu: The Story of Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz*. “They beautifully adapted to what was by then a hugely successful formula. They did it so well, it was hard to tell who wrote what after they joined the team.”

“The two Bobs were brought in to give some new life to the show and help out the other writers,” said Rick Carl, a Lucille Ball historian. “Everyone would sit in Jess Oppenheimer’s office until a story emerged. They would work backwards, conjuring up a final block comedy scene and then finally reaching that scene logically. It was not an easy task.”

from 1 million to 4 million, and CBS knew that TV was going to blossom in a big way.”

With television on the rise, studios were desperate to find fresh material — or adapt existing content from other sources.

“*My Favorite Husband* was not just an influence; it was the direct inspiration and precursor to *I Love Lucy*,” said Rick Carl, a Lucille Ball historian. Carl is a founding member of the *I Love Lucy* fan club, co-producer and art director for the *Loving Lucy* conventions, and consultant for *I Love Lucy*-related documentaries.

Bringing the writers over from the radio show seemed like a natural choice to get things started. The radio show was already a success, so it stood to reason that the same team could perform similar magic for TV.

“Jess Oppenheimer, Madelyn Pugh and Bob Carroll Jr. ... all worked on the radio program, and several of the early episodes of *I Love Lucy* were based on episodes of *My Favorite Husband*,” said Cindy DeLaHoz, author of the books *Lucy at the Movies* and *The Lucille Ball Treasures*.

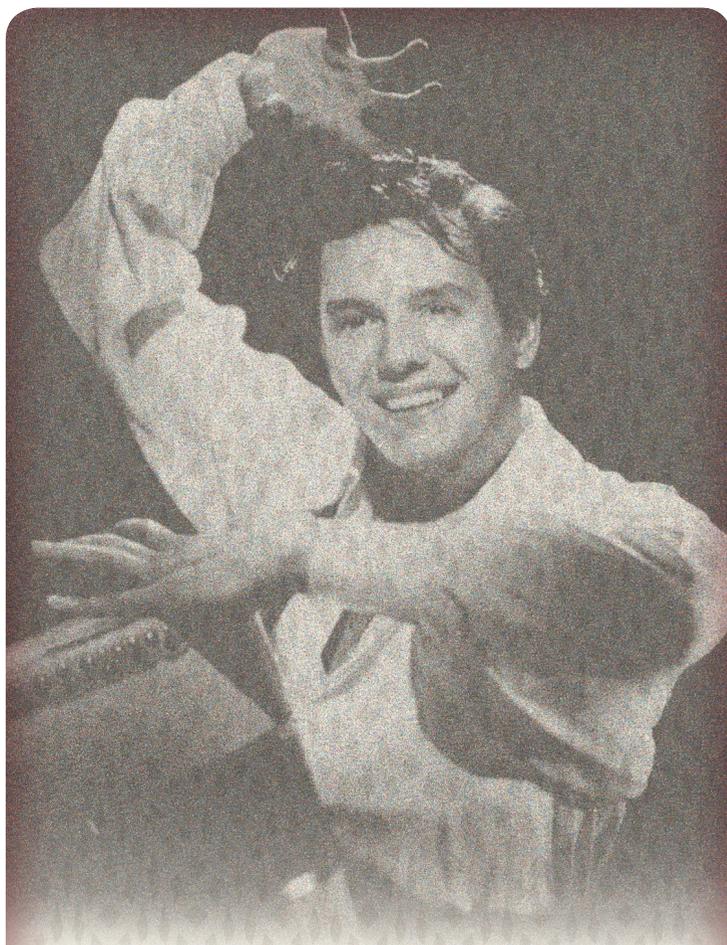
There was an extra benefit to retooling the radio show. Because television was new and *I Love Lucy* would utilize cutting-edge technology for the era, many details still had to be worked out.

“When Madelyn, Bob and Jess started writing [for *I Love Lucy*] in June 1951, the specific method of filming was still unresolved, so the three were concocting scripts that would play as if done ‘live,’ stories that required a minimum of costume changes, sets and complicated physical business,” Condit said.

From there, changes were made to the characters themselves. Gone were George and Liz Cooper. The TV couple was very different — the husband was tailored to fit Desi Arnaz.

“The basic framework for *I Love Lucy* — a wacky housewife versus a more staid husband, with an older married couple as sidekicks — came from the radio show,” said Tom Gilbert, journalist and author of *Desilu: The Story of Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz*. “It was then altered to accommodate Desi Arnaz in the role of the husband. Because he was Cuban-born with a thick accent, he wouldn’t be believable as a banker, so the character was made a band-leader, which Desi was in real life. Many other changes were necessitated as a result.”

WIKI COMMONS



The Remarkable *Desi Arnaz*

Desi Arnaz got along with everyone both personally and professionally. “Everyone loved Desi,” said Tom Gilbert, co-author of *Desilu: The Story of Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz*.

Arnaz was, in essence, the glue that held all the elements of *I Love Lucy* together, whether that be the cast, crew, production or even the running of the studio. His ability to respect writers’ talents, boost Lucy’s confidence so she could give her best performance, and negotiate on behalf of Desilu Productions is nothing short of remarkable.

He famously had a photographic memory, which helped him accomplish his many duties on the set and keep the show running.

THE CREATIVE CENTER

At the show's creative heart were the writers — Oppenheimer, Pugh and Carroll. Oppenheimer also served as producer, and was, Carl said, “the creative force” behind the show, something Ball herself acknowledged when she called him “the brains” of *I Love Lucy*.

It was also Oppenheimer who was responsible for creating many of *I Love Lucy*'s noteworthy elements. “When developing the pilot episode for *I Love Lucy* in 1950, it was Jess who suggested that Desi play a ‘working stiff’ bandleader and Lucy be his zany wife whose greatest wish is to break into show business,” said DeLaHoz.

“Jess contributed a lot to the series both as producer and head writer,” Gilbert said. “But to me, his greatest contribution was the child-

like quality he imbued in the Lucy Ricardo character ... which had its genesis in his earlier writing for Fanny Brice's classic ‘Baby Snooks’ persona.”

Although some of the early episodes of *I Love Lucy* were retooled plots from *My Favorite Husband*, Pugh and Carroll were soon off and running, coming up with original ideas, scripts and wacky adventures. The fun was also hard work. The writing duo worked as many as 70 hours per week coming up with ideas and putting jokes on paper, Carl said.

At Monday morning conferences their ideas were reviewed; when an idea was selected, the writers would start developing it. “They would plot an episode with Jess Oppenheimer, often spending the entire day outlining the story, scene by scene, laugh by laugh,” Carl said.



Pictured from left at the buffet table during a 1955 *I Love Lucy* press party are Vivian Vance, Jess Oppenheimer (producer and writer for the show), Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz. Along with the show's writers, Oppenheimer has been described as the creative heart of *I Love Lucy*.

WIKI COMMONS

“Then they would take all the information necessary to the plot and weave it into the story so it would flow naturally.”

Once a concept was chosen, Carroll and Pugh would write a first draft and deliver it to Oppenheimer, sometimes even dropping it off in his home mailbox, Gilbert said. Oppenheimer would then go through the script, making notes, smoothing over points and making sure the tone was consistent with the other episodes.

Pugh and Carroll would incorporate Oppenheimer’s suggestions and hand in a new draft. “[Jess] would do a final ‘polish’ and would dictate the entire script from start to finish on a dictation machine,” Carl said. “In his position, Jess needed to know every aspect of the script so that if a question arose at any time during the production, he knew the reason why something was in there.”

A COLLABORATIVE PROCESS

Arnaz proved to be an ideal collaborator. What made the atmosphere on the set so special was in part the fact that Arnaz implicitly trusted his creative team. This gave them the freedom needed to produce their best material. Arnaz was a great “script doctor,” as Ball called him, and easily spotted plot holes, Gilbert said.

“Desi trusted and, most importantly, nurtured the writers,” he added. “If he didn’t like something in the script, he coddled them into fixing it. They were charmed by Desi and valued his opinion.”

Indeed, when praise was appropriate, Arnaz was forthcoming. When critiquing was necessary, he was a master at gently making suggestions so no one’s feelings were hurt.

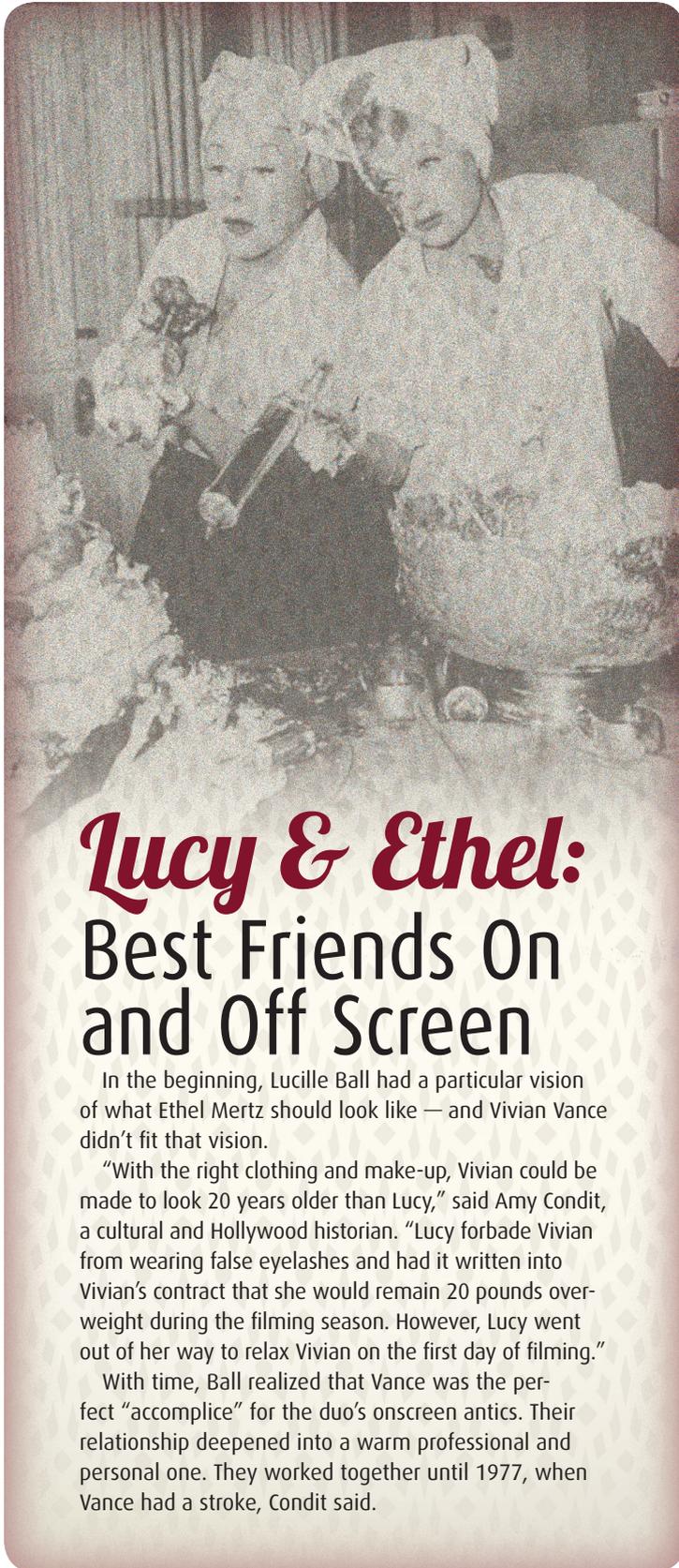
Ball also trusted Arnaz and deferred to his opinion. Arnaz paid attention to how the writers worked, noticed how they tested out the jokes and stunts, and had a keen instinct for how Ball’s comedic skills worked. At times, Ball would worry that certain plots wouldn’t work or was afraid to try something. Without his encouragement, Ball might not have per-

Writers Madelyn Pugh and Bob Carroll Jr. (shown in 1981 in the top photo) would often imagine Lucy and the gang in some zany situation or precarious position and then construct the plot backward from that premise.





Without Desi Arnaz's encouragement, Ball might not have performed some of Lucy's more outlandish stunts.



Lucy & Ethel: Best Friends On and Off Screen

In the beginning, Lucille Ball had a particular vision of what Ethel Mertz should look like — and Vivian Vance didn't fit that vision.

"With the right clothing and make-up, Vivian could be made to look 20 years older than Lucy," said Amy Condit, a cultural and Hollywood historian. "Lucy forbade Vivian from wearing false eyelashes and had it written into Vivian's contract that she would remain 20 pounds overweight during the filming season. However, Lucy went out of her way to relax Vivian on the first day of filming."

With time, Ball realized that Vance was the perfect "accomplice" for the duo's onscreen antics. Their relationship deepened into a warm professional and personal one. They worked together until 1977, when Vance had a stroke, Condit said.

formed many of Lucy Ricardo's crazy stunts.

"It's hard to imagine, but as funny as Lucy was as an actress, she didn't innately know what was funny — on paper, at least," Gilmore said. "Desi helped her a lot with that. He knew what would work for her, and he also knew that the scripts had to maintain a thread of believability — no matter how preposterous the situation Lucy found herself in. And he was a stickler for that believability. Lucy mainly worried about looking like a fool, which she had every right to fear. Not many performers could pull off the outrageous stuff she did without looking silly or forced."

Arnaz greatly appreciated Pugh and Carroll's willingness to test stunts before presenting them to Oppenheimer and the rest of the cast. By the time Arnaz, Ball, Frawley and Vance read the script, many of the possible kinks had already been worked out.

For instance, in the episode where Lucy and Ricky are handcuffed together, Carroll and Pugh really handcuffed themselves to each other during the writing process to figure out what worked, what didn't and exactly how the actors needed to move for maximum laughter.

There were other instances, too. Pugh was in the unique position of being a female writer — rare at the time — and because she was writing for a female comedic lead, she made the ideal "stand-in" for Lucy during the creative process. This improved and refined the scriptwriting.

"In the 'Tennessee Bound' episode where they end up in Ernie Ford's hometown, the

LEFT: WIKI COMMONS; RIGHT: EVERETT COLLECTION



From Real to Reel

Desi Arnaz and Lucille Ball were directly involved in the scriptwriting for *I Love Lucy*, with Arnaz checking everything over to make sure it was suitable and (somewhat) believable, no matter how absurd the plotline. But sometimes Ball and Arnaz were indirectly responsible for the plots that appeared in the show. The ever eagle-eyed writers would sometimes take inspiration from the real-life couple.

"As the company spent a lot of time at the studio and became close, on occasion, incidents in the Arnazes lives would influence the writers and show up in a script," Lucille Ball historian Rick Carl said. "An example of this was Lucy's love of fresh air at night while sleeping, where Desi wanted it warm and toasty. This was the direct inspiration for the scene in 'Breaking The Lease,' where the Ricardos try to outsmart each other by continuing to open and close the window before going to bed that night.

"The writers were lucky to capitalize on their knowledge of Lucy and Desi's real-life characteristics and carefully tailored their material at times. Knowing, for instance, that Lucille Ball was superstitious and knocked on wood, they wrote the script for 'The Séance,' in which Lucy spoiled a business deal for Ricky by consulting a horoscope. The fact that Lucy liked to imitate Tallulah Bankhead, Bob (Carroll) and Madelyn (Pugh) wrote a sequence in 'Lucy Fakes Illness,' where Mrs. Ricardo imagines herself as the famous actress," Carl said.

original idea was for there to be a big taffy pull in the final scene, during which the gang wraps the sheriff and his twin daughters up in the taffy and escape,” Gilbert said. “Bob and Madelyn tried it and found out that the taffy fell apart and wouldn’t work. So they changed it to a rope and a square dance. Madelyn tried out the ‘flaming nose’ from the William Holden episode so Lucille wouldn’t be hurt. They also considered rolling Lucy up in a rug for a comic bit, but when Madelyn tried it, she almost suffocated, so the idea was ditched.”

Ever the good sport, Pugh was also locked in a steamer trunk and stuck in a loving cup, Condit said. “She also glued icicles to her face, filled her blouse with eggs and tried wrapping chocolate bonbons at breakneck speed.”

BRINGING LUCY TO LIFE

Once the plots and details were worked out, it was the actors’ responsibility to breathe life into the jokes on the page. Buoyed by Desi’s positivity and support, Ball was capable of extraordinary comedic feats. Their bond was



In The Director’s Chair

Although there was more than one director who worked on *I Love Lucy*, the man who sat in the director’s chair most often was William “Bill” Asher, who later went on to find considerable success as the producer of all eight seasons of *Bewitched* with his then-wife, Elizabeth Montgomery.

Asher directed episodes 39-127, an epic run that included the famous “Job Switching” and Hollywood episodes. His job wasn’t always easy — directing the show was a delicate combination of creating art and technical precision.

“Asher’s creativity was his innate ability to watch the floor and ensure that all cameras and actors hit their marks at the required moments,” said Rick Carl, an *I Love Lucy* historian. “Precision was crucial, as nobody wanted to stop a performance in front of the audience. He rarely asked for pick-ups and when they did, it was usually a guest star who forgot a line.”

Things got off to a rocky start between Asher and Lucille Ball, who initially didn’t trust the director and overrode his decisions on the set and told the other actors what to do, said Tom Gilbert, author of *Desilu: The Story of Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz*.

Asher knew he had to put a stop to this, so he confronted her, and Ball fled the set in tears.

“[Bill] was so new he didn’t even have an office yet, so he went to the men’s room to ponder what he had just done, and started to cry,” Gilbert said. “Desi came in and told Bill he was right to confront Lucy, and things went pretty well from then on. Lucille came to trust Bill, but occasionally, when tasked with a particularly outlandish stunt, would quip, ‘Would you ask *your* wife to do this?’”

William Asher (right) with wife Elizabeth Montgomery, the actress who played Samantha on the show *Bewitched*.

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such that, even when their marriage began to crumble, their chemistry remained on screen so the audience never knew that there was marital strife in private.

Similarly, the on-screen chemistry between the Ricardos' sidekicks, the Mertzes, was just as strong. The dynamics between the four actors created magic on screen, but things weren't always idyllic behind the scenes.

Vance and Frawley often had difficulty getting along. The character of Fred was a curmudgeon, so it lent some authenticity to the role when Frawley and Vance struggled in real life. It didn't always make things easy, though.

"Vivian considered herself to be sophisticated and glamorous in real life and hated the idea of people believing she could be married to 'that fat old man,'" Gilbert said. "Bill Frawley, who had sung in vaudeville, thought Vivian was full of herself and made fun of her singing. There wasn't really an open animosity, but they didn't relish hanging out together. Whatever tension there was played well on screen, as they were always putting each other down."

Much has been made over the idea that Vivian and Bill "hated" each other. They were hardly best friends, but creating the best show possible was priority No. 1 for all involved — and the actors at the heart of *I Love Lucy* were all seasoned professionals first and foremost.

TIMELESS TELEVISION

The result of everyone's creativity and hard work? Lightning in a bottle. The show continues to make new generations of fans laugh. Those scripts that were dropped off in mailboxes, stunts that were worked out ahead of time and the dedication of the cast created something timeless. "*I Love Lucy* possesses that rare combination of superior writing and credible acting, which keeps the shows fresh," Carl said.

According to Carl, when interviewers asked Ball about the secret to her popularity and the

amazing longevity of her television shows, she never hesitated to answer, "my writers!" "After the 100th episode of *I Love Lucy*," Carl said, "Lucy expressed [her appreciation for the writers] to the entire company, 'I love them dearly, I appreciate them daily, I praise them hourly, and I thank God for them every night!'" □

Elisa Jordan is a journalist who writes and speaks on Hollywood history. She also regularly serves as script editor for numerous documentaries on Southern California. Her favorite episode is "L.A. at Last!" (see page 34).



Madelyn Pugh often tried Lucy's stunts first to make sure they were safe.