

Saluting a comedy legend

The Phil Silvers Show provided, as Ricky Gervais claims, 'the blueprint for sitcoms', and 71 years on from its debut, it's still making fans laugh, says Steve O'Brien

In 2003, Radio Times published a list of the greatest sitcoms of all-time, only it wasn't *Fawlty Towers* or *Steptoe & Son* or *The Office* that topped their poll, but a show that, at that time, had been off the air for 44 years. 'Sgt Bilko,' said Mark Lewisohn, writer of the Radio Times Guide to TV Comedy, 'is sitcom's high-water mark.'

Officially known as *The Phil Silvers Show*, occasionally referred to as *Sgt Bilko* and originally titled *You'll Never Get Rich*, this series about a scheming US Army motor pool sergeant would stretch to 144 episodes over four years and make a global star out of its fast-talking leading man.

The Fifties saw the television situation comedy explode in the US. It was the decade that launched such iconic hits as *I Love Lucy* (1951-57), *The Honeymooners* (1955-56), *Leave*



it to *Beaver* (1957-63), and *Father Knows Best* (1954-60), yet *The Phil Silvers Show* would score more Emmys than any of them, with three consecutive wins for Best Comedy Series.

RAPID-FIRE SUCCESS

But it wasn't just America that loved *The Phil Silvers Show*. In Britain, it was an immediate success. The character's various scams, cons and hustles could, in the hands of a less personable actor, have been offputting, but Silvers' rapid-fire delivery and innate likeability made him an instant favourite.

'It's simply timeless,' says Steve Everitt, curator of Coventry's *Sgt Bilko Vintage Emporium*, who became 'instantly hooked' on the show during a repeat run on BBC1 in the early Eighties. 'It was superbly written by Nat Hiken and wonderfully performed by the finest ensemble cast ever. Phil also gave Bilko a heart and a conscience so the audience was always rooting for him.'

Though the show orbited around Silvers, it also boasted first-rate supporting players including Harvey Lembeck (Cpl Rocco Barbella), Allan Melvin (Cpl Steve Henshaw), Maurice Gosfield (Pvt Duane Doberman), Herbie Faye (Cpl Sam Fender), Billy Sands (Pvt Dino Paparelli) and Mickey Freeman (Pvt Fielding Zimmerman), all of whom formed Bilko's platoon, a tight-knit group

whose unwavering loyalty to their commanding officer gave the show its warmth. 'I think all the characters were so well defined,' Allan Melvin told the Phil Silvers Appreciation Society in 2008. 'That was part of Nat's genius. He felt every integral part of the show was important. For Nat it wasn't just the star and a bunch of supporting characters. He felt everybody contributed something and it reflected in the success of the show.'

What's often unacknowledged about *The Phil Silvers Show* was how radical it was in the Fifties, in its depiction of military life. Back then, members of the US Army were usually portrayed as athletic, virile and proudly patriotic, yet Bilko's platoon are almost, to a man, scruffy, cowardly slob. They were everymen, as recognisable to America as any of suburban couples of *The Honeymooners* or *Leave it to Beaver*. And in *Ernie Bilko*, viewers saw someone who was smarter and had more chutzpah than anyone around him, including the nominal boss of the sleepy, nowhere post of Fort Baxter, the hapless Colonel Hall (Paul Ford).

Nat Hiken left *The Phil Silvers Show* after its second series, later scoring another success with NBC's police sitcom *Car 54, Where Are You?* (1961-63). Bilko would continue for another two seasons, bowing out in 1959 with the Neil Simon-penned *The Weekend Colonel*.

Silvers himself would never again match Bilko's success. There's much to love in *The New Phil Silvers Show* (1963-64) in which he starred as a devious factory foreman, but whereas viewers warmed to Bilko, the character of Harry Grafton lacked the charm of the actor's most famous creation.

Over the years, the actor came to resent the success of *The Phil Silvers Show*, complaining that

the character overshadowed his other work. 'I'll always be Bilko,' he told *The New York Times* in 1972, during a Broadway run of *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, 'and I find it quite annoying. Here I am in one of the biggest hits of my career, but they still call me Bilko.'

Though *The Phil Silvers Show* signed off nearly 70 years ago, it boasts quite a legacy. The Hanna-Barbera series *Top Cat* (1961-62) was created essentially as a cartoon version of *The Phil Silvers Show*, while in 1996 the character was resurrected for the big screen for *Sgt Bilko*, starring Steve Martin as the wise-cracking hustler.

TIMELESS APPEAL

And fans can pay tribute to their favourite series by visiting Steve Everitt's lovingly curated museum, the only one of its kind in the UK. 'Some of my proudest possessions include Phil's smoking jacket, his favourite pipe, a penknife gifted to Phil by Bing Crosby and a Hamilton watch presented to him by Jack Benny,' Steve tells us. 'Visitors from all over the world love the museum and our efforts to keep Phil Silvers' legacy alive.'

Forty-one years on from the actor's death, the fact that the *Sgt Bilko Vintage Emporium* can attract so many visitors is testament to the show's – and the character's – enduring popularity. And many of today's biggest names in comedy point to the show as an inspiration, with Ricky Gervais claiming that 'it laid out the blueprint for sitcoms'.

Sergeant Ernie G Bilko may have bent every rule at Fort Baxter, but his true victory was in changing the face of television comedy forever. Phil Silvers, we salute you.

■ *Sgt. Bilko's Vintage Emporium is open Wednesday-Sunday at Unit 2C, Fargo Village, Far Gosford Street, Coventry CV1 5ED* sgtbilkosvintageemporium.com



Get-rich-quick scams were the order of the day for Bilko and his men