

**TV LAND - DETROIT**

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# TV LAND – DETROIT

## OVERVIEW

Growing up in suburban Detroit during the 1970s, I spent a lot of time in front of the television. As part of a wave known as TV's second generation, I was fortunate enough to witness the tail end of what was to become a lost art form. Long before the blitz of cable, satellite dishes, pre-packaged syndication, infomercials, and reality shows, there existed a brand of pop-culture charm that has forever vanished from the airwaves...it was called LOCAL TV!

Back in the days when a local TV celebrity was someone other than a news anchor, Motor City stations had a wealth of stars worth showcasing. In the days of my youth alone, I loved waking up to our local versions of the classic clowns Bozo and Oopsy. On rainy and wintry afternoons, I relished in classic "B" movies from Bill Kennedy and cheesy horror flicks with Sir Graves Ghastly. After the evening news, I'd watch Bob Allison give away more dinners for two at the Roostertail restaurant than the cash jackpot to local contestants on *Bowling for Dollars*. And when my parents would let me stay up past my bedtime, it was always a real treat catching the late night shenanigans of the Ghoul.

Those are just a few of my personal memories in brief, but going back even further to television's first generation, Detroit baby boomers grew up with an even greater host of local heroes that were dear to their hearts. Who can forget the likes of such characters as Soupy Sales, Captain Jolly, or Sagebrush Shorty? How 'bout the loveable clowns Ricky from the Shrine Circus and Twin Pines sponsored Milky (whose face appeared on milk cartons long before those of missing children). Who took a trip to *Wixie's Wonderland* or visited *Jingles in Boofland*? And which teens in Motown danced to the musical beats featured on *Swingin' Time* or *Club 1270*??

These vintage shows and many more belong to a dying breed of local icons that've been overshadowed by the popularity/publicity of our sports figures and musicians. Detroit TV played a key role in many of our upbringings for which it's earned a special fondness in our memories.

## BOOK SUMMARY

The goal of *TV Land – Detroit* is to preserve our television heritage by highlighting 25 of the most popular and/or longest running locally produced entertainment shows broadcast into Southeast Michigan homes. Told from the recollections of the people associated with the programs as well as historians and die-hard fans, the book's chapters will carry three main themes: history, nostalgia, and commentary. The idea is to format each subchapter with historical data, nostalgic trivia, and comments about the direction of local TV today. By depicting the shows in layers, it adds several different dimensions to the variety of accounts, thus keeping the material continuously fresh.

So, what's going to make *TV Land - Detroit* stand out from any other book on the subject? Simple, it's presentation as a "bookumentary." What's a booku-wachamacallit?? It's a book that's designed to read like a television documentary script. Think about it...what better way to market a book about TV than to package it like a glorified teleplay?! It's always easier to read quotes in an interview format than it is to pick out a line (here and there) buried underneath a mountain of fancy rhetoric derived from a third party. And for a book that's intended to be fun-spirited, the stories are best portrayed if told by the sources in their own words.

Just like a television documentary, sound bites from interviews will be pieced together so they tell an interesting story from many views with a rhythm that'll make it hard for the reader to put the book down. Also, I do want to mention that this is not entirely a compilation of quotes. My experience in producing documentaries has taught me that written narration is necessary to introduce the subjects, provide any missing information, and to bridge audio bites together so they flow smoothly. This written text style accompanied by photographic illustrations (as many as I can get my hands on) shall comprise the total "feel" of the book.

Currently, there are no books on the market covering local TV...and should there be one in the future, this chosen format is unlikely to be duplicated. So with that in mind, *TV Land - Detroit* can be viewed as a welcomed addition to its readers' book collection.

### **AUDIENCE**

*TV Land - Detroit* is intended to catch the eye of anyone browsing the Local Interest section in bookstores. Although it's more likely to grab the attention of the baby boom and gen-x crowds as they are always on the prowl to buy back a piece of their childhood (mainly because so many of them have never left it). Also, any TV buff, local history fan, or mass media student is sure to find this book a treasure worth purchasing for their library or coffee table.

### **SOURCES**

As mentioned earlier, the primary sources for research and information in this book are going to stem from in-depth interviews. Anyone directly related to a show, or has intimate knowledge of a show, or has ever appeared on a show, or was just a plain old fan of a show, shall be interviewed. These are the kinds of people that would be targeted for interviews if this were to be an actual television documentary. Why? Because they are what gives this book all its credibility! The horse's mouth is always more informative, more valuable, and more colorful than drawing upon secondary sources of any kind.

Will these folks cooperate in the preparation of this book? Absolutely yes!! Unlike a "tell-all" book that's intended to tarnish a celebrity's image, this is a positive book paying homage to our forgotten stars...not to mention it's free publicity for them! Many of Motown's yesteryear (example: Sonny Eliot or Dr. Sonya Friedman) can still be found in our own backyard. Some of the ones who've passed away (like Milky the Clown) have

offspring residing here... While others such as Soupy Sales who've left the Motor City for the Big Apple, are very accessible and love talking about their glory days.

I mention Soupy particularly because he's a local legend I had the pleasure of meeting while working at WNIC radio. Unlike so many celebrities who quickly forget their fans and can't even be bothered to sign a quick autograph, Mr. Sales truly understands from where his fame came. Not only was he friendly and polite, he gladly took the time to pose in personal pictures with station personnel. Soupy Sales is an excellent example of a "public access" celebrity!

### **ILLUSTRATIONS**

Certainly a book of this caliber needs illustrations in order to succeed. After all, I'm presenting tales about a "visual" medium. Therefore, still photographs of the stars/programs are crucial. Just like a documentary, many of the photos are likely to come from media archives, libraries, and personal collections. These resources often (not always) require fees for reproduction and licensing. Therefore, the amount of archival illustrations may be limited depending on what I can reasonably afford or deem most appropriate for enhancing the stories in the book.

Also, in instances where I have the opportunity to acquire original snap-shots of the stars as they look today along with any program memorabilia, I'll shoot my own photographs. Current head shots of all interviewees is planned as they may be placed next to their first quote in the book, thus giving the reader a face to attach to the text.

Exactly how many illustrations will appear in the book is anyone's guess...but you can bet I'll make every attempt to accumulate as many pictures as possible. That's half of what will make this book so priceless!!!

### **THE AUTHOR**

After graduating from California State University, Long Beach in 1990 with a degree in Radio/Television/Film, I returned to my native Michigan where I began working at WNIC radio. During my four years as a producer in radio, I developed a hunger for local television. Upon conceiving an idea for a local TV series, a co-worker/friend of mine and I solicited the show to all of the stations in town.

Facing rejection from all of them, we set out to shoot the program ourselves. Impressed with the finished product, WDIV aired our documentary, *Michigan, It Started Here!* on December 7, 1996. Much to my surprise, it became the highest rated show of the day and earned a Michigan Emmy nomination for "writing."

That success led me to produce, write and direct two more local documentaries for WTVS entitled, *Michigan and the American Dream* in 1998 and *Titanic: The Final Chapter* for WDIV in 1999. For *Titanic* I personally received an amazing six Emmy nominations (four of which were for writing), the most for any individual in Michigan

television for a single show! And of course with all of those nominations to my credit, I managed to win an Emmy in the category of Segment Writing.

Since then, I have written and directed a short film, drafted more than 25 television show proposals for various genres, penned several press releases, and authored two articles for *Michigan VUE* magazine (back to back in 2001) entitled, *Video: A Short Cut to Filmmaking* (March/April issue) and *So, Ya Wanna be a Producer...* (May/June issue).

Whether it be from my days as a television commercial talent extra in the mid 1980s, my internship as a Hollywood extra's casting agent in 1990, my previously mentioned successes, or my full-time job (at Technicolor for the past six years) in home video duplication handling the Warner Bros. account...show business has always been at my fingertips. I've had the pleasure of setting foot on A-list feature film sets, network television shows, attended TV "pitch" meetings at both the national and local levels, and ate lunch with television personalities, executive producers, and agents.

While the better part of my childhood was consumed watching television, the greater part of my adult life has been spent playing the TV game. My credentials along with my genuine passion for preserving history qualifies me to assemble the most awesome book about the golden age of Detroit television... *TV Land - Detroit!*

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## **CHAPTER DESCRIPTIONS**

The following is a brief synopsis of what'll be covered in each chapter/subchapter.

### **Chapter 1**

#### **DON'T TOUCH THAT DIAL...**

The book will begin with the histories of our local stations...every milestone from the time they hit the airwaves to their present day shall be highlighted.

#### **2, 4 and 7...Detroit's other big 3**

In the beginning, WWDT-TV Channel 4 became the first television station in Michigan and the sixth TV station in the nation on March 4, 1947. Two months later they changed their call letters to WWJ and began commercial broadcasting, which included local news and sports. In October of 1948, WXYZ Channel 7 and WJBK Channel 2 sign on and together they comprise Detroit's three VHF channels with network affiliations – NBC, ABC and CBS. Like Ford, GM and Chrysler...2, 4 and 7 from day one have dominated Detroit's television dial!

#### **Channel 9 from across the river**

Long before changing its call letters to CBET, Windsor's Channel 9 shared the same call letters as its most popular radio station CKLW. Though it isn't in the city of Detroit, some of our most memorable shows came courtesy of our friends from across the river.

#### **Then along came 56 and public TV**

Three years after the formation of educational television in Ann Arbor, the basis for the Public Broadcasting System (PBS), WTVS Channel 56 signs on the less receptive UHF band on October 3, 1955 as a non-commercial educational station.

#### **20, 50 and 62...who knew?**

Who would've guessed that Detroit's three "newest" UHF stations would someday have network affiliations! With WKBD Channel 50 joining the dial in 1965, WXON Channel 20 in 1968 and WGPR Channel 62 (the nation's first African-American owned station) in 1975, no one could've predicted that one day these three weak signaled independent stations would someday be championed by Paramount, Warner Bros. and most surprising of all...CBS!

### **Chapter 2**

#### **CHARACTERS AND PUPPETS**

Some of the most cherished memories begin with the kid shows for which there was no shortage. That's why it would only be fitting to start our walk down memory lane with them.

## **Soupy Sales**

For nearly a decade before he became a national superstar, Soupy Sales belonged to the baby boomers of Detroit in the 1950s. The man with an over-sized bow tie, who got a pie in the face every time he stuck his head out the door, ate lunch with the local "birdbaths" everyday at noon on Channel 7. *Lunch with Soupy* introduced kids to the meanest dog in town, White Fang, his antithesis Black Tooth, Pookie the Lion, Hippi the Hippo, and Willie the Worm. Does anyone remember how to do the "Soupy Shuffle?"

## **Captain Jolly & Poopdeck Paul**

One of the premier shows to feature Popeye cartoons and contests was hosted by Captain Jolly. Portrayed by CKLW disc jockey, Toby David, *Popeye and His Pals* aired seven days a week from shores of Windsor's Channel 9. With Poopdeck Paul (CKLW weatherman, Paul Allen Schultz) on deck for the weekends, these swabs sailed in the '50s and '60s with one of the highest rated kid shows in America!

## **Jingles in Boofland**

Once upon a time, across the river, there was a magical place called Boofland...and there lived a court jester named Jingles. Between cartoons, kids watched with anticipation to see the puppets, Cecil B. Rabbit (a spoof of Cecil B. DeMille) and Herkimer Dragon plot to get Jingles in trouble with the King of Boofland. With Larry Sands voicing and operating the puppets, Jingles was played by Jerry Booth who also composed the snappy "Boofland Loyalty Song," which was sung at the end of every show.

## **Johnny Ginger**

Long before AMC began packaging Three Stooges shorts with Leslie Nielson as the professor of "stoogeology," Channel 7 had Johnny Ginger. Dressed as a stagehand, then a bellboy and later an astronaut, this local comic of the baby boom era slapped Motown silly with its daily dose of the Stooges.

## **Wixie's Wonderland**

"Taxi your tricycles close to the screen. Take your dolly by the hand. For there are many wonderful things to be seen, on *Wixie's Wonderland!*" From 1953 to 1957, comedian Marv Welch appeared every morning as a blue suited elf-like character named Wixie for local pre-schoolers. Within this whimsical wonderland, Wixie (a play on the WXYZ call letters) sang and joked between cartoons with pals G-Whiz - the clown, Gramps - the animal expert, and pianist Diane Dale. Sponsored by Bosco, this show ran "live" for five years without a script; relying heavily on the ad-libbed talents of Welch...let's see reality TV top that?!

## **Sagebrush Shorty**

Blazing the trails of the Motor City in the tradition of Howdy Doody was *Sagebrush Shorty*. Ventriloquist Ted Lloyd played a cowboy called Sagebrush Shorty, who along with pals, Skinny Dugan and Bronco Billy Buttons, entertained kids from the corral at WJBK with cartoons and contests - the kind of contests where any little buckaroo who saved enough bottle caps could ride off into the sunset on a brand new Schwinn bicycle...happy trails!

## **Chapter 3** **SEND IN THE CLOWNS**

Before the invasion of Teletubbies, purple dinosaurs, and the Wiggles, there was a time when children's television allowed for some "clowning" around.

### **Milky**

If you can remember the Twin Pines Dairy phone number, Texas-four-one-one-oh-oh, chances are you're a fan of Detroit's legendary clown, Milky. Local magician Clare Cummings first suited up to play this mystifying clown in 1950 for a two-hour show called *Milky's Movie Party* featuring cartoons, westerns, and magic tricks. After five years at WJBK, Milky moved to WXYZ briefly before permanently settling at WWJ, Channel 4. Renamed *Milky's Party Time*, the format expanded to include a live studio audience, the Sir Lancelot serial, and contest games made up of two teams: the boys against the girls. Milky was so beloved that Detroit mayor Louis C. Miriani presented Cummings with a key to the city while declaring December 16, 1960 "Milky the Clown Day."

### **Ricky**

Shrine Circus clown Irvin Romig was offered a local TV gig in 1953. For the next 12 years, he appeared on Channel 7 as Ricky the Clown. Beginning with a peanut gallery of 25 kids and a donkey, Ricky gagged and sang between Laurel & Hardy shorts on a weekly series called *Tip-Top Fun*. As his popularity grew, the show's name would change to the *Ricky the Clown Show* along with its schedule to five days a week. Soon the program became host to an ensemble of circus acts (including members of Romig's family), cartoons, games with prizes, and Fonda the Llama. During its run, the *Ricky the Clown Show* became the only children's program in the country to be sponsored by an auto dealer...an accomplishment that Romig was especially proud of.

### **Bozo**

A huge franchise that made its way to Motown was Bozo the Clown. From the circus tents of CKLW, Art Cervi entertained children as the fluffy red-winged haired clown with cartoons, games, prizes, and clean humor (unlike his "Crusty" caricature depicted on

*The Simpsons*). During Bozo's run in the 1970s, Larry Thompson teamed up with the clown as his magician sidekick, Mr. Whoodini.

Here's a personal tidbit: As a child tuning in *Bozo's Big Top* every morning, I never dreamed that as a teen I would see Mr. Whoodini on the faculty of my high school. Unbeknownst to any of us, Larry Thompson was employed full-time with the Livonia Public Schools. In the early 80s he became the student activities director at Churchill High School, my alma mater. We all remember Thompson's Bozo days, which made us feel special because we had a local celebrity in our midst. Pep rallies hold a particularly fond memory for me... That's when Thompson appeared in his Whoodini costume to perform magic tricks and old shtick for the student body.

## **Oopsy**

"Oopsy daisy" was the trademark phrase from a clown recognized by the flower-potted hat upon his head. This WWJ original creation became a long-lived favorite of TV's second generation. Too young to know Ricky or Milky, gen-xers spent their weekend mornings with Oopsy beginning in the late '60s and continuing through the '70s. While featuring cartoons wrapped around skits, one of the more delightful segments was Oopsy's art gallery. Local kids were encouraged to send in drawings to be exhibited on the show...what a thrill it was!

## **Chapter 4** **LET'S DANCE!**

The huge success of *American Bandstand* spawned an onslaught of localized musical dance shows in every television market. With Motown as the home for some of the most legendary rock 'n' roll icons, it was only natural for Detroit TV to capitalize on that winning formula.

### **Swingin' Time**

Some of the coolest dance steps of the '60s tapped the floors of CKLW every afternoon on *Swingin' Time*. Hosted by radio disc jockey, Robin Seymour (who once predicted that Elvis Presley would be a major flop), this program featured 50 to 75 local teens dancing six days a week, while giving their "yeas" and "boos" to new records. When touring the Motor City, big name stars such as Chubby Checker and Frankie Valli performed on this show as well as our own hometown talents like the Supremes and the Temptations.

### **Club 1270**

Another version of this format, but with a slightly different flavor, was Channel 7's *Club 1270*. Named for its AM radio band 1270, Lee Alan and Joel Sebastian hosted local teens on a set designed to simulate a dance club. The kids would sit with each other at tables before shuffling to the beat of rock 'n' roll. And just like its Canadian counterpart,

*Club 1270* snatched up performances from several high-profile singers/bands who came to Detroit such as Leslie Gore, Frank Zappa, and the Rolling Stones.

An interesting note about the Stones: Still relatively unknown during their 1964 American tour, the Rolling Stones appeared at Detroit's Olympia Stadium where they sold less than a thousand seats. As part of their promotion in the Motor City, they mingled with the teens on the set of *Club 1270* before their performance. Imagine the kind of "satisfaction" realized in later years from the kids who sat with Mick Jagger and Keith Richards before they reached superstar status!

## **The Scene**

Inspired by the popularity of *Soul Train*, the country's first African-American owned TV station put its own spin on dance with *The Scene*. Hosted by Nat Morris, inner-city teenagers had the daily opportunity to strut their stuff to the rhythms of funk and soul in front of the WGPR cameras from 1975 - 1987. Not only did the show succeed in booking such mega-stars as Stevie Wonder; it was also instrumental in launching the careers of local unknowns. Though *The Scene* was viewed as a "black" program, its popularity made all kids in Metro-Detroit take notice of Channel 62. I remember a (Caucasian) girl at my high school who had danced on *The Scene*...we thought it was fantastic!

## **Chapter 5** **GOING TO THE MOVIES**

Back in the days when current A-list features only ran primetime on the major networks, long before movie channels were ever an idea, local television filled much of its time with old B-movies. What made watching these unknown flicks such a treat, were the obscure hosts who brought them into our living rooms.

### **Bill Kennedy**

Perhaps the undisputed king of them all was the man in the loud plaid jackets, Bill Kennedy. From the studios of CKLW and later WKBD, *Bill Kennedy at the Movies* aired live every afternoon, giving audiences an intimate knowledge of the behind-the-scenes intricacies of the "Dream Factory." The former B-movie actor often appeared around the commercial breaks to give us some trivia about the film at hand, complete with his own personal stories relating to the movie, while taking viewer calls at the same time. For 30 years, Detroiters gave Bill Kennedy a loyal following that Hollywood never could!

### **Rita Bell**

In the declining years of black and white television, Rita Bell arrived at WXYZ to host a daily morning movie show that awarded small cash prizes to any caller who could name that tune. From 1960 – 1977, the long-running *Prize Movie* jackpot would grow by \$7 (in honor of Channel 7) each time someone failed to guess the song. In addition to the

movie and prizes, was the wholesome persona of Ms. Bell. This former big band singer had an old-school glamour all her own that Hollywood starlets today wouldn't dare to compare.

### **Sir Graves Ghastly**

Looking toward the wackier side of movie shows, *Sir Graves Ghastly Presents* comes to mind. Through the graveyard gates of WJBK, viewers were led to a coffin where the sinister laughing vampire arose every Saturday afternoon. Portrayed by Lawson J. Demming, Sir Graves Ghastly gave local households its weekly chill of scary classics like the original 1931 *Dracula*, sci-fi cult favorites such as *The Attack of the Mushroom People*, and a string of hokey low-budgeted horror flicks that usually starred Christopher Lee or Peter Cushing. Wrapped around the commercial breaks, one could find the English accented Sir Graves hanging around the yard with his gruesome cohorts. Who remembers the talking skull?? Neeehheehaaahaaa...

### **The Ghoul**

Taking bad movies on late night to alarming heights of weirdness in the '70s and '80s was *The Ghoul*. Played by Ron Sweed, this lunatic who sported a fake-looking goatee with broken sunglasses and a shag carpet-like wig, gave us the incentive to stay up late just to see what disturbing antics he was going to pull tonight. If the Ghoul wasn't blowing up food or model cars, he'd add sound effects or his own dialogue to the movie (which livened them up), or he'd create a parody skit from his no-budget set at Channel 50, 20 or 62...he's been on (as well as kicked-off) all of them. Love him or hate him, the Ghoul is said to have been an influence to many in the Motor City's performing arts community.

## **Chapter 6** **CAN WE TALK?**

Well before talk shows began poisoning audiences routinely with enormous amounts of smut, Detroit TV had the talk show circuit covered with entertainment, advice, and hard-hitting politics.

### **Kelly & Company**

The husband and wife team of John Kelly and Marilyn Turner gave Detroit its morning fill of Hollywood gossip, beauty secrets, fashion shows, celebrity look-alike contests, and guests whose stories were inspiring. You never saw a guest ambushed by the hosts or audience regarding explicit subjects, nor did anyone curse or fistfight on the show. Channel 7's *Kelly & Company* presented talk in a viewer-friendly style with a light-hearted atmosphere and talent chemistry that's become extinct. The open set before a live audience without news, sports, traffic and weather reports from five different anchors is what made *Kelly & Company* a morning show worth watching.

## **Sonya**

Unlike any other program produced in Motown, Dr. Sonya Friedman accomplished a feat that every local star dreams of...national syndication from home. Hah, what? From the studios of WDIV, *Sonya* was syndicated into households across the USA. As a psychologist, Dr. Friedman dished out advice on her talk show in the late '70s and '80s, long before anyone ever heard of Oprah or Dr. Phil. She did it straight from the heart without the attitude of Dr. Laura or the fame of Dr. Joyce Brothers...but more importantly, she did it from Detroit!

## **Lou Gordon**

Before hard-hitting political talk shows could dominate the news channels, WKBD gave us Lou Gordon. Featuring some of the most controversial guests of the day, the Saturday evening *Lou Gordon Program* frequently painted Detroit's mayors as corrupt and provoked politicians so much; they'd walk out of the interview. Even Bob Hope was grilled for his defense of President Richard Nixon. But Gordon's most notable interview came from Michigan Governor George Romney who claimed he was "brainwashed" by US officials into changing his views about Vietnam. Gotta wonder if Bill O'Reilly ever watched Lou Gordon?!

## **Chapter 7** **AND LET'S NOT FORGET...**

Next we have a group of shows that really don't fit any particular category, but avid fans might say they deserve to be in a class of their own.

## **The Lady of Charm**

Once we lived in a society where everyone understood the meaning of common courtesy. Decades before Martha Stewart ever became a household name, Edythe Fern Melrose showed the ladies of Detroit the finer points in proper etiquette. As one of the earlier programs on WXYZ, *The Lady of Charm* began its 12-year run in 1948. Home based topics for women such as cooking, table settings, manners, home product tests, and fashion were specially prepared every midday by our own seasoned veteran of social grace.

## **George Pierrot**

When we think of home movies broadcast on TV, *America's Funniest Videos* immediately comes to mind. And when we want to escape to a distant land, we switch on the Travel Channel. For many years on WWJ, local travel authority George Pierrot combined travel with home movies to create a show ahead of its time. Appearing daily in the late afternoon, *George Pierrot Presents* exhibited films taken by travelers to give the audience a "non-brochure" view of world destinations. Within a barrage of stories from

his guests, it was Pierrot's playful humor and ramblings that gave him such a devoted fan-base.

### **Michigan Outdoors**

While George Pierrot was whisking Metro-Detroit around the world, Mort Neff and Jerry Chiappetta never traveled beyond the coastlines of the Great Lakes! Every Thursday evening on WWJ and later WXYZ, *Michigan Outdoors* showed local hunting and fishing enthusiasts the greatest places to pitch a tent or dock a boat for nearly 16 years. From a log cabin set, Neff and Chiappetta brought out the "outdoorsman" in all of us (even if you didn't believe it was there).

### **Bowling for Dollars**

Before the word "kingpin" carried criminal overtones, Bob Allison was introduced every evening on Channel 4 as our kingpin. Why? Because he hosted the popular *Bowling for Dollars* in the 70s. From the Thunderbowl Lanes in Allen Park, local contestants bowled one frame and received a dollar for every pin knocked down. Any shot with a spare or a single strike was worth \$20 and dinner for two (usually at the Roostertail restaurant), while two consecutive strikes won the jackpot which started at \$500 and went up 20 bucks for each missed hit. Viewers at home also had a chance to match the bowler's prize by sending in post cards in hope of becoming the contestant's "Pin Pal." *Bowling for Dollars* was a superb example of why franchised game shows worked so well in the local markets...anyone could play!

### **At the Zoo**

No book about local TV would be complete without the bantering antics of Detroit icon, Sonny Eliot. When he wasn't reporting the weather at Channel 4, the quick-witted man with the boyish face and chipper voice took us to the zoo. The long-lived *At the Zoo* program showed-off Sonny's zany sense of humor while on location at the Detroit Zoo in Royal Oak. Unlike the news, where Eliot played a small part amongst a regular cast, *At the Zoo* served him to us on a silver platter with his own show. This often left audiences puzzled as to which was cuter...the zoo animals or Sonny?!

## **Chapter 8** **THE END OF AN ERA**

So what lies ahead for local television? What happened to the glory days? Will they ever comeback? Probably not!

### **Syndication and infomercials rein death**

As a local producer who grew up at the end of the golden age, I've come to learn the hard way (the expensive way too) that the passion for original homegrown television died in favor of pre-packaged syndicated shows and infomercials. A pre-packaged syndicated

show such as *Wheel of Fortune* is already produced, audience tested and the station is PAID to air it by the syndicator. Plus, the station gets additional revenue from sponsors for commercials...they can't lose!

The same logic goes for infomercials. It's a "paid to run" versus "production cost" kind of game. And just like any other business challenge, it's the public who ends up on the losing side. No wonder nobody watches the local channels on weekends anymore.

### **So what's left? Rip-offs, sports, and public affairs...who cares?**

Unless we're tuning in for the local news, not much else comes to us locally. Televised sports have been with us since the beginning; that'll always be here...lots of sports fans in Motown. FCC regulations require public affairs programming, so that'll be around for a half-hour each week, which means more news and politics (ho-hum). And unless you're a reality show junkie, local rip-offs of these overblown talent contests (you know the ones) simply won't suffice! What used to "be" is gone and it'll never "be" again. So what's left? Do we care??