



Who was Edie Adams? New DVDs spotlight a TV trailblazer

POP CANDY

Whitney Matheson, USA TODAY

11:27 a.m. EST November 19, 2013

When I [stumbled upon a bunch of episodes](#) of *The Ernie Kovacs Show* about 10 years ago, I immediately fell in love with the comedian. The '50s series was decades ahead of its time, masterfully blending the artful, surreal and just plain funny.

In 1962 Kovacs, just 42, died in a car accident. He left behind a wife and daughter — and a lot of debt.

Kovacs' widow, **Edie Adams**, was an actress and Juilliard-trained singer who appeared on her husband's show. After his death, she produced and starred in a show of her own, which has just been unearthed in a new DVD set.

Here's Edie: The Edie Adams Television Collection features every episode of Adams' variety show, which aired from 1962-64. It's evident from the first few moments that Edie truly aimed to educate as well as entertain, welcoming legendary musicians like **Duke Ellington** and **Stan Getz** alongside riveting entertainers like **Don Rickles**, **Sammy Davis Jr.**, **Bob Hope** and **Rowan & Martin**.

The show is often overlooked, but I hope this release will make people take a second glance at the late performer. (Adams died in 2008.) Edie's show was smart and brilliantly experimental, blending in-studio performances with ambitious on-location shoots and spontaneous comedy bits. I love how in one episode we see **Peter Falk** delivering a monologue on a bustling New York City street and, in another, we see Edie singing with **Eddie Fisher** in a swinging '60s Vegas nightclub.

The other day I spoke to Adams' son, **Josh Mills**, about the collection and his mother's legacy. It was a pleasure to learn more about her; I just wish I'd had the opportunity to meet Edie when she was still around.

Me: How long have you been trying to bring these episodes to DVD? I can't believe I hadn't seen any of them until now.

Mills: Shortly after my mother passed away, I was approached to release a DVD set of the Ernie Kovacs material. Shortly thereafter, I made it a point to try and get my mom's shows onto DVD.

Everyone knows the genius of Ernie Kovacs, but I really wanted to make sure that my mom got the same treatment and recognition for her show. It absolutely blows my mind to see my mom singing with Stan Getz, kidding around with Sammy Davis Jr. or even playing straight man to **Dick Shawn**. These shows were from an era before I was born, so it always leaves me agog. (*Editor's note: Josh is Edie's son from her second marriage.*)

She's affectionately known as the patron saint of television preservation for her tireless efforts with the Kovacs tapes, but she also saved her own show — and I felt it was about time others knew about that, too. Fifty years is long enough!

Can you tell me more about what Edie's personal life was like when the show began? How did Ernie's death affect her own career?

I think that my mom doesn't get enough credit for really putting aside her sadness of losing her husband and getting to work so quickly after he passed away. Kovacs died in January of 1962, and her show began in April of that year. So it was not even three months later that the pilot aired.

My mom was absolutely crushed emotionally after losing Kovacs — but the IRS bills, gambling debts and the bills Kovacs ran up at ABC creating his famed ABC specials made it so that she either had to file for bankruptcy or get to work. She was not one to throw in the towel, so she basically did anything she could to pay the bills over the next few years.

She put together a nightclub act for Vegas and clubs throughout the country, she did guest spots on TV shows, she did movies and she made sure she was seen out-and-about to make sure the press saw her, too. She was thrust into a head-of-household role in 1962 when very few women were in that position. She really was a maverick and a role model for women, and she should be remembered as such. She always rolled up her sleeves when the going got tough, but she never lost her sense of humor or her love of life.

Prior to Kovacs' death, my mom was a well-regarded, Tony-winning actress and singer on Broadway, had logged many hours of live television on his show and others and had done a few movies, including *The Apartment*. However, she really had to focus on keeping a roof over the head of her family and food on the table. I think her career suffered in many ways because she wasn't able to do things she wanted to do, but things she had to do. She was really talented.

Do you have a favorite performance or moment from the collection? I love the stuff with Sammy Davis Jr.

The Sammy Davis Jr. show is amazing. It's like he was **Robin Williams** and they just said, "Just let Sammy be Sammy." I have many favorite moments, but it still blows my mind to see my mom singing with Duke Ellington, **Johnny Hodges** and the Ellington orchestra. Ellington was arguably the greatest composer of the 20th century, so it's just fantastic to see.

Your mother was ahead of her time in so many ways — I mean, it's still kind of a rarity to see a woman producing and starring in her own show. How do you think she influenced other performers who came after her?

You know, her show was unlike many other variety shows — it's very different from anything that came along in the '70s or even in the '60s. With the demise of the variety show, very few people are able to act, sing, dance a little, etc., so there really isn't someone who does or could do what she and others like **Julie Andrews** or **Judy Garland** did.

I am always intrigued when talented performers like **Ann Magnuson** or **Sandra Bernhard** have glowing things to say about my mom. I think about women like **Ellen DeGeneres** or **Katie Couric**, who really are able connect with their audience, and wonder how difficult it must have been for my mom to try and do that in 1962. She was well-educated and talented, but she always had to pretend to be a "dumb blonde" in meetings and do what she wanted to do regardless. That she learned from Kovacs!

A couple episodes show young Mia Kovacs. I know that was hard for your mother to watch after Mia's death. What is it like for you to watch the footage, all these years later?

When we got the first round of transfers of what was to become the DVD set and I put them into the player, I just sat there at home alone and just wept at that episode. It was not something I really even thought about, but as soon as I saw Mia at age 3, I just lost it.

My mom could never watch the show my sister was on, either. It was just too painful even years later. As a teenager, I sort of had a sympathetic but somewhat less understanding take: "Why can't she just move on?" But

after becoming a parent myself, I can't imagine what my mom went through. Not only did she lose her husband but she lost her only daughter, too. That was devastating for her.

Shortly after my sister passed away, my mom had to get back to work and did a stage version of *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas* as the lead. She had to sing *Girl, You're a Woman Now* to one of the female cast members. I don't know how she did it, but she was a trooper and always put one foot in front of the other. She was a survivor.

Note: Here's Edie: The Edie Adams Television Collection *is on sale now*.