

## History of Television - Black Sitcoms

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### BLACK SITCOMS: Recasting Stereotypes

Although Amos and Andy is cited most often as an example of black-face radio performances, there were many other stereotypical black-face characters in old time radio shows like Two Black Crows, Beulah and Aunt Jemima.

Two Black Crows were based on coon stereotypes while both Beulah and Aunt Jemima were based on the "Mammy" stereotype.

Beulah was a supporting character on the popular Fibber McGee and Molly radio series and became a spin-off show. The show was broadcast on radio from 1945 to 1954, and originally portrayed by White actor Marlin Hurt.

Hattie McDaniel eventually took the role on radio and was one of four black women to play

Beulah on the later television series.



### Stereotypes, 1950s

- The Beulah Show (1950-52)! Starring Louise Beavers
- The Jack Benny Show (1953)! Co-starring Eddie Anderson

## Early Television and the Civil Rights Movement

When integration became Federal law in the 1950s it put small Black theaters out of business and that brought an end to the production of race movies. Blacks continued to play servant roles in mainstream movies but the only Blacks to appear in early television were those who performed racist caricatures. Much of early television's variety entertainment was transplanted from vaudeville, while many situation comedies came from radio.

Popular radio shows like Amos and Andy and Beulah were an instant success on television. But it wasn't long before a backlash developed from Black leaders who objected to the racist stereotypes and especially the fact that they were the only portrayals of blacks on TV.

In 1951, *Amos 'n' Andy* ranked 13th in the Nielsen ratings and in 1952 it won an Emmy award. The NAACP responded by initiating a boycott of its sponsor, Blatz beer. By April 1953 Blatz withdrew its sponsorship and CBS announced "The network has bowed to the change in national thinking." Yet the series was in syndication more than 4 times as long as it was broadcast on the network.

It remained in syndication for 13 years after it was withdrawn from the network schedule. As late as 1963, it still played on 50 US stations.

### Amos 'n' Andy

#### Arguments against the show

- Demeaning stereotypes
- Ignored real-life problems faced by blacks
- Inaccurate depiction of black middle class

#### Arguments for the show

- Provided jobs for black actors
- Normalized black life
- Depicted black professionals

### Sitcoms 1960's

#### Two Shows, Two Stars

- **I Spy**, 1965-1968 -Starring Robert Culp & Bill Cosby
- **Julia**, 1968-1971 -Starring Diahann Carroll & Marc Copage

#### I Spy, Julia

- Significant breakdown of black stereotypes
- BUT they also established a standard for black inclusion in prime time:
  - Blacks are acceptable as long as they are teamed with white co-stars and don't display racial heritage

### Blacks on TV: 1970s

- Number of roles for blacks continues to increase
  - Black middle class growing
  - Black political clout grow

#### One Show, One "Event"

- All In the Family, 1971-1979
  - Starring Carol O'Connor
- Roots, 1977
  - 7-part mini-series

#### All in the Family

- Explicitly included racism (and other social issues) in the plot
- Lead character is a bigot
- Success allowed producer Norman Lear to create spin-offs with black stars
- Further success leads to more “black” programming
- Important milestone because the show included frank discussion of race relations and racism in America
- BUT also established a standard by which these issues could be depicted:
  - Dealing with race and racism in the US is acceptable in comedy programs

### Roots

- 85% of homes saw all or part of the show
- Major effort to depict black culture accurately and thoroughly, in Africa and America
- First major TV drama to feature a primarily black cast, and deal with white racism and black slavery in prime time
- BUT also established a standard by which white racism against blacks would be depicted:

Racial oppression by whites against blacks could be shown, but in historical settings, not the present.

### Blacks on TV: 1980s

#### The Cosby Show , 1984-1992 - Challenging Established Standards

- Primarily black cast, not teamed with whites
- Black culture, history is central to the show
- Contemporary social issues frequent theme
- BUT, comedy genre

#### Frank's Place, 1987-88

- Black cast and setting
- Black culture and history
- Contemporary race-related themes

#### Frank's Place: Challenging Established Standards

- Not a mixed race cast
- Not culturally generic
- Not set in the past
- Not a comedy
- "Dramedy"
- Went beyond the TV industry's accepted standards of black representation

- RESULT - Cancelled after 22 episodes

### Sitcoms Today

- Many TV shows deal with contemporary issues of race and racism against blacks
- Many TV shows are infused with black history and culture
- Blacks are not confined primarily to situation comedies (2/3 of black actors in dramas)

The gradual progression of African-American programs has often been a bumpy road; from the outrageously offensive days of "Amos and Andy", to the Blaxploitation shows and films of the 70s, to today's conundrum of *cliches* suggests networks are trying to ramp up scripted television with the help of brown faces.

Is the success of [Scandal](#) and [House of Lies](#) the blueprint producers were waiting for to re-introduce Black Hollywood back to mainstream viewers, (is this all they have to offer)?

I believe there's still work to be done. Television is definitely still playing a major role in perpetuating the limited perception of not only Black men, but Black people and our culture as a whole.

### Conclusion

***The story of blacks on network TV Two steps forward, one step back?***

[Source](#)

**For more details History of Racism in TV:**

[http://www.clutchmagonline.com/2012/09/comedic-relief-the-role-image-of-black-men-on-tv/Black Sitcom](http://www.clutchmagonline.com/2012/09/comedic-relief-the-role-image-of-black-men-on-tv/Black%20Sitcom)

<http://www.black-face.com/>