

The Phil Silvers Show



"Doberman's Sister"

November 20, 1956 ■ CBS

Sitcom heroes were crafty. For a form devoted to scheming of all kinds, this was practically a job requirement. Each new installment required a fresh plot, in both senses of the word. Lucy dreamed of show-business success; Ralph pictured that pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. Both were forever denied what they wanted most, because what would happen to us if they ever got it? The early sitcom, in its most essential incarnation,

thrived on failure, and on the perpetual return to equilibrium. But what if chaos itself were a sitcom's default mode? And what if the scheming were less toothless and more disreputable? Could a sitcom be about an amoral con man and still be a sitcom?

These were the questions prompted by *The Phil Silvers Show* (also known as *Sgt. Bilko* and *You'll Never Get Rich*; like any good con man, the show traveled under a number of aliases), which ran on CBS from 1955 to 1959. *Phil Silvers* was never the ratings titan that *I Love Lucy* was, nor did it have the afterlife of *The Honeyymooners*. So consider "Doberman's Sister," written by Nat Hiken, Leonard Stern, Tony Webster, and Billy Friedberg, as a route map to the sitcom road not taken, one laid out in detail and then mostly abandoned for close to four decades, until another set of clued-in, fearless Jewish comedians picked up where Bilko had left off.

Each episode of *The Phil Silvers Show*, created by former Milton Berle writer Nat Hiken (who had also written for a radio show called *The Magnificent Montague* that featured an up-and-coming performer named Art Carney) was a puzzle for us to unpack. How would Bilko (his very name hinting at what the good sergeant planned to do to each of his carefully cultivated pigeons) massage unyielding reality to bend to his desires? Who would give way before his assault of brown-nosing, misdirection, and shameless flattery? Occasionally—just to keep matters interesting—Bilko's schemes would fail. But the glory of Bilko was his ability to stay one step ahead of his humorless pursuers. For 1950s television, this was dazzlingly amoral territory to inhabit. "Nat's point of view pervaded on *Bilko*, which was very realistic and very satirical of human nature," *Phil Silvers* writer Coleman Jacoby observed of Hiken. "It was about a con man working his score. It was not a family show, like all those other shows at the time."

The series was designed as a star vehicle for Silvers, who as a child of the burlesque theater was a natural performer with a yen for the stage. "As a kid I just loved singing," Silvers writes in his autobiography. "If a five-year-old can have an orgasm—that's how I felt." Young Fischl Silver became known as "the reel-breaker-down singer," instant entertainment at the picture show when the movie inevitably broke down. At twelve, he was auditioning for

theater owners in Brooklyn, his name massaged into the more felicitous Phil Silvers. He did a song-and-dance number with a little girl, and when they toppled over, Silvers looked out at the audience and said, "It's in the act." He got a huge laugh.

Later, when Silvers's voice began to change and his singing career came to an end, he became the child in the husband-and-wife vaudeville act of Flo & Joe. Silvers was a stage juvenile into his twenties, only graduating when MGM signed him as a contract player. He eventually spent nine years at 20th Century-Fox playing a string of roles he collectively characterized as "Blinky." He was, he later recalled, "the good-humored, bespectacled confidant of Betty Grable or John Payne." Silvers was always the sidekick and never the star; he never got the girl. That would soon change.

Flush off a Broadway success, Silvers was given a television show of his own, about a scheming sergeant in the US Army whose men also serve as the targets of his cons. Blinky was no longer. But CBS, unsure of the show, crammed the pilot into its vaults, unaired. In "a coup worthy of Bilko," a daring ad-agency representative rescued it from CBS's tomb and flew it out to North Carolina to show to executives at R. J. Reynolds, who loved Bilko and agreed to cosponsor the show. "The Camel people liked the way I smoked on the tube: I really bit into the cigarette," Silvers said. "I think they enjoyed that more than the show." *The Phil Silvers Show* was on the air, but its fate was still likely a dismal one. It had been scheduled opposite Milton Berle's *Texaco Star Theater*, long the most popular show on television. Ratings began dismally and then sank further, but by November 1955, *Phil Silvers* was gaining ground on Berle. By the next year, Berle was off the air and "Doberman's Sister," airing in November 1956, epitomized the inimitable Silvers magic.

In the episode, it is almost Family Day at Fort Baxter, located in the midwestern wilds of Kansas, and Sgt. Ernie Bilko (Phil Silvers) and his men are breathlessly preparing the base for the arrival of the men's mothers and fathers and, above all, for their sisters. "Start makin' trades!" Bilko orders, telling the soldiers to swap family obligations for dates to the base dance. The men immediately launch into a furious round of horse-trading,

trotting out insider gossip and old recriminations. One soldier puffs out his cheeks to indicate that Gadowski's sister is too tubby for serious consideration. Another takes issue with his buddy having shown him a picture of Lena Horne the previous year and trying to pass it off as his sister.

As the negotiations rush toward their conclusion, one sizable speed bump emerges: what about the still-unseen sister of Private Duane Doberman (Maurice Gosfield)? Doberman is slovenly, portly, permanently unkempt, his chin dribbling into his neck like a melted puddle of ice cream. ("Doberman," Bilko calls out in another episode, snapping his fingers, "shower. That's an order!") His clothes hang limply off his shoulders, as if ashamed to reveal too much of their owner's dishevelment. Doberman has a small fringe of hair hanging lank over his forehead, a nose like a fishhook, and twinkling eyes that gaze up in dull wonder at Bilko each time he launches a new fishing expedition for his men's money. He is Bilko's designated whipping boy and mascot, the man he lectures about never being taken advantage of even as he has him scrambling to turn on faucets and fetch his shoes.

Doberman's popularity with audiences clearly rankled Silvers. "After a few weeks on our show he became a national celebrity," Silvers observes of Gosfield in his autobiography. "Off camera, Dobie thought of himself as Cary Grant playing a short, plump man." Gosfield's personal behavior found no more favor in Silvers's eyes: "Dobie never disappointed us in one of his talents: slobbery. His tie was always stained and his pants drooped. When he sat down to a meal he felt surrounded by enemies who would snatch his food if he didn't gobble it up first. He clutched his fork and knife as if they were weapons." (The book goes on for pages in this manner.) Clutching his own pen like a weapon, Silvers reserves the sharpest stiletto for last: "As the television shows and appearances rolled on over the years, Dobie began to have delusions. He believed he was a comedian." Coming from Silvers, no harsher indictment could be imagined.

Doberman's intellectual limitations are so severe as to make his physical limitations seem comparatively minor. So when Bilko raises the issue of Doberman's sister, and who might date her, his soldiers scatter to the four

winds. "Freeze!" Bilko orders, the natural mock affability of the grifter giving way to stern command when his men are hesitant to follow orders. Bilko is bald and double-chinned, with a curved, beaky nose, but his perpetual goofy grin is a hint of the whirring machinery inside.

Sensing a potential mutiny, Bilko sketches out a plan to turn Doberman's sister from a booby-trapped consolation prize into a highly sought-after commodity. Bilko picks out one potential sap, Private Zimmerman (Mickey Freeman), and offers him a side deal. If he'll agree to take Bilko's steady girlfriend, Joan (Elisabeth Fraser), to the dance, Bilko will be freed up to squire Doberman's sister. Zimmerman agrees, and Bilko breaks out into ecstatic thanks, grabbing his underling's face in appreciation: "Bless you! Yes!" Zimmerman leaves the barracks, and Bilko, his insight into human weakness unparalleled, correctly predicts that he will be back in under one minute, begging to be set up instead with Doberman's sister.

Bilko offers his men a scientific principle of attractiveness, gleaned from years of intensive study of past Family Days: "The uglier the brother, the more beautiful the sister." "If that's true," one member of his platoon quips, "Doberman's sister is Miss Universe." That night, the men toss and turn in their beds, each dreaming of the stunning, voluptuous Diane Doberman. Bilko, master con artist, is so gifted that he even manages to convince himself. He tosses and turns in bed, dreaming of spotting the Marilyn Monroe-esque Diane at a movie premiere.

Bilko is rarely content to execute only one con when so many further twists on the original scheme beckon. The next day, he crafts a fake telegram about a sick ninety-six-year-old aunt to blow off Joan and have a shot at squiring Doberman's sister. Then Diane arrives, and she is Doberman in a blonde wig. No, literally: Gosfield gamely puts on drag for this shock-cut visual punch line. Bilko's flowers immediately wilt, drooping down the length of his arm. Having manipulated everyone around him so thoroughly, Bilko has mistakenly manipulated himself as well. But the final joke redounds to his own benefit. Joan spots him with Doberman's sister and realizes—well, "realizes," since Bilko himself is seemingly no longer in on his own scheme—that all his contortions had been to protect a fragile

visitor from humiliation. Joan kisses him for his troubles, and Bilko smiles shamefacedly, a naughty boy rewarded for his flimflamery.

Bilko lives for competition—for a chance to show off his skill in the dark art of persuasion. Everything is an opportunity to get ahead. His soldiers are his designated ATM for an endless array of schemes: a football pool, a bed-making contest, a singing competition, uranium mining (seemingly a standard trope of 1950s sitcoms), a trip to Hollywood. The sweetest three words in the English language for Bilko are “money from home.” Bilko can bilk his men with even the gentlest whiff of intrigue. He rents a store and has soldiers throwing money in his direction, certain he has a killer racket cooked up, even when he has absolutely nothing more than an empty storefront.

Even when Bilko’s mostly hapless nemesis, Colonel Hall (Paul Ford), puts an end to his illegal gaming, Bilko and his men find a way. They turn a dry talk on Beethoven into an opportunity to place bets on the number of times a visiting lecturer twitches during her speech. The audience audibly counts along with each spasm, and when Mrs. Whitney hits twenty-five, the men cheer: “A new indoor record!” The arrival of a new soldier known as “the Stomach,” who eats to excess when miserable, prompts Bilko to play an endless medley of sad wartime songs in the hopes of getting him psyched up for an eating contest. Weakness and disorder are Bilko’s companions; without them, all his scheming is for naught. He hears that an army psychologist has cured the Stomach’s ailment, and blurts out his true feelings before reining himself in: “That dirty . . . That’s nice.”

Flattery gets Bilko everywhere. He routinely engages in shameless puffery of his designated targets. He “confuses” a middle-aged nurse for Greta Garbo, and has her twittering and massaging his shoulders with alacrity, her native suspicion dissipated by his blitzkrieg of sweet talk. Colonel Hall’s wife is mistaken for Betty Grable until Bilko corrects himself. “Imagine mistaking you for Betty Grable, Miss Monroe,” he chuckles. An heir to a \$200 million fortune comes to the base, and Bilko seeks out innovative ways of praising his new soldier. Coming to the motor pool where he works, he inspects a jeep carefully, pointing to one particular bolt with wonder.

“Who turned that screw?” Bilko exclaims, as if in the presence of a Vermeer of the Phillips head. “Is this a genius? Is this a genius?” he asks on another occasion. “They make a fuss about Edison!” Bilko’s Yiddish inflections, his immigrant’s line of patter, unexpectedly give way to a brilliant burlesque of the military bark when he is annoyed or harried. His voice deepens, his shoulders stiffen, and this icon of sloth is suddenly a ramrod-straight paragon of US Army discipline: “On-the-double-ee-ya-oh-up!”

Like any good huckster, Bilko is adept at the long con, at setting a scene for his rubes. A politician visits the base, and Bilko paints a compelling portrait of deprivation in the hopes of winning increased government funding for Fort Baxter. At lunch, Bilko generously offers to carve the meat, slicing a single hot dog and serving it to his guests. They are also welcome to take as many beans as they like—three *or* four, he does not mind.

Occasionally—*very* occasionally—Bilko is foiled. His plot to field a tone-deaf crew for an a cappella singing contest, and make a killing by betting against his men, is stymied when a new recruit unexpectedly has a golden voice. “You got a radio on?” Bilko innocently wonders when he first hears him singing, only belatedly realizing the collapse of his intrigues. An attempt to wrangle a seat at a legendary navy craps game results in Bilko and his cronies only narrowly avoiding the brig—and penury. These reversals keep things interesting enough, although *The Phil Silvers Show* is generally more concerned with how Bilko proceeds than whether he succeeds. BEWARE OF PICKPOCKETS, reads the prominently placed sign in Bilko’s office, but the warning is ironic, the shark warning the minnow of the dangerous characters swimming around the neighborhood.

Bilko is eternal. He is the emblem of American skullduggery and amorality and calculation, its homegrown antidote to patriotic treacle. He puts on a pageant for the one hundredth anniversary of Fort Baxter in “The Centennial,” offering a rapid-fire revue of American history in his own image. There Bilko is, selling whiskey to Native Americans, sentencing a Civil War soldier to death in order to romance his wife, and turning over military secrets to a sultry spy during the Spanish-American War. In another memorable episode, “The Revolutionary War,” Bilko stumbles across an ancestor’s

military medal and wonders about past Bilkos' acts of bravery. "There was a Bilko in the Revolutionary War?" Colonel Hall exclaims. "And we won?" Silvers takes the stage as his 1776 incarnation, selling boat tickets for the crossing of the Delaware ("Wine, women, Hessian girls") until there are no seats left. "General, I'm afraid you're going to just have to stand," he tells George Washington as the boat sets out. Upon closer investigation, the war hero's medal is indeed genuine, but it was awarded by King George III.

Phil Silvers exists on the borderline between the first and second waves of television—the urban first adopters, living along the Eastern Seaboard, who made stars of the sophisticated likes of Milton Berle and Sid Caesar, and the rural audiences who came to television later, and brought with them a taste for less challenging fare like *The Beverly Hillbillies* and *Green Acres*. Embodying the clash to come between television past and television future, Bilko is the savvy Jewish schemer outclassing the fatally slow hicks of the army.

The show was produced early enough in the history of television that Silvers's flubbed lines were not edited out of the final shows, preserved for eternity as an accidental measure of sitcom realism. *The Phil Silvers Show* is otherwise little interested in realism. Its version of the US Army is a stumblebum hodgepodge of malcontents, buffoons, and mediocrities. Fort Baxter, ostensibly located in the Midwest, appears to be peopled entirely by soldiers from Brooklyn, Queens, and New Jersey. *Phil Silvers* is a New York show artificially relocated to a Kansas that seemed to exist, as in the famous Saul Steinberg *New Yorker* cover, just over the river from Ninth Avenue.

Bilko is forever stumbling across unacknowledged phenoms—boxers who can soak up punishment like champs, competitive eaters with wooden legs for the storage of hamburgers. These individuals are not only Bilko's targets but also occasionally future sitcom stars themselves. The show emulates its star, seeking out unappreciated talent, laying the groundwork for future long cons. Channeling future flashback episodes of *The Dick Van Dyke Show*—or perhaps laying the groundwork for that series' recurrent interest in military life—Dick Van Dyke guest-stars as a green recruit in the episode "Hillbilly Whiz." Here, Van Dyke is Private Lumpkin, a country

bumpkin whose Doberman-like mental deficiencies are more than made up for by his ability to nail an infinitesimally small target with a stone from 150 feet away. Doberman, as is his wont, immediately crushes Lumpkin's hand in the door of a jeep. Lumpkin, entirely unconcerned, tells Sgt. Bilko not to worry—he can pitch with the other hand just as well. Bilko immediately breaks into sobs of gratitude and relief.

Bilko sees an opportunity to penetrate the inner sphere of some *real* charlatans and hustlers: the owners and players of Major League Baseball. He wants to sell Lumpkin to the New York Yankees, but the pitcher protests. As a good Tennessee boy, he could *never* play with any Yankees. Not to worry, Bilko insists; the Yankees—ranging from Mickey “Moonshine” Mantle to Colonel Casey Stengel—are all country boys, too. The perennial con man arranges for some of the Yankees to visit the base and prove their down-home decency. Someone mentions that Yogi Berra, that famed purveyor of accidental wit, reminds them of Doberman, and Berra is curious to catch a glimpse of his malaprop-spouting television doppelganger. Bilko enters a room with famously tightfisted Yankees boss Dan Topping, and as they emerge, Topping is apologizing to *him* for not being able to offer his client more money.

Van Dyke is the eternal naïf, a goof to be molded to Bilko's specifications. There is little sign here, as of yet, of the wit or intelligence of his Rob Petrie from *The Dick Van Dyke Show*. This is Bilko's show, and there is no room on *The Phil Silvers Show* for any competitors. But Silvers's inborn ability to talk his way out of any sticky situation is the eventual inspiration for Rob's gift of comic gab. In another time and another place, Bilko would have made a great comedy writer.

Still bearing traces of puppy fat on his cheeks, that other future icon of sitcom decency stops in to tempt Bilko in the episode “Bilko the Art Lover.” Years before achieving television immortality as *M*A*S*H*'s Hawkeye Pierce, Alan Alda is almost unrecognizable here, too conventionally polished to bear much resemblance to the bathrobe-wearing, perpetually disheveled Hawkeye. But a line can be drawn from the garrulous, silver-tongued Bilko to his student and fellow military iconoclast. Both Bilko and

Hawkeye never met a rule they didn't assume applied only to others. Both find a way to turn army discipline into an optional endeavor. And both lend the fatally polite sitcom a touch of genuine anarchic vigor.

There is also a line to be drawn between *The Phil Silvers Show* and *M*A*S*H*, the last and most successful of the military sitcoms. But *M*A*S*H* took its setting far more seriously than its predecessor, for which it was merely a convenient foil. The latter perspective may seem odd to contemporary viewers, for whom military service is both somewhat exotic and not at all comic. In television's early years, however, lighthearted military sitcoms were a regular presence. Following *Phil Silvers* were the likes of *McHale's Navy* (ABC, 1962–66), starring Ernest Borgnine as a World War II PT boat captain; *F Troop* (ABC, 1965–67); the POW camp comedy *Hogan's Heroes* (CBS, 1965–71); and the *Andy Griffith Show* spinoff *Gomer Pyle, U.S.M.C.* (CBS, 1964–69). The idea behind all of them was, as critic John Leonard put it, "that you could enlist or be drafted into a family." Barracks were alternate-world living rooms, and platoons were haphazard families for a form looking to re-create the familiar sitcom blend of intimacy and conflict in new surroundings.

In another important respect, though, *Phil Silvers* and its successors parted company, thanks to a dramatic shift in television audiences. We think of TV as coming into existence all at once in the late 1940s, but in truth, TV was rolled out in the United States in limited release. Having begun in cities like New York and Los Angeles, television only slowly made its way into the interior of the country. Rural areas were especially tardy in receiving access to TV signals. As television penetrated deeper into the less populated pockets of the country, the nature of viewership changed. Series such as *The Phil Silvers Show* were unlikely to appeal to this new, less sophisticated brand of television watchers. Thus, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the sharp-edged urbanity of the early sitcoms, most of which seemed to be set in Brooklyn or Manhattan or peopled by natives of the five boroughs, was replaced by a distinctly middle-American mind-set. Creatively, the sitcom took a decided step backward, in large part because its new audience demanded a different kind of programming less given to artistic daring.

The idea of a laugh track in a Nazi POW camp seems, to contemporary ears, like a bad joke—no, the very definition of a bad joke. And yet, *Hogan's Heroes* was a sizable television success just half a decade after Adolf Eichmann went on trial in Israel for the mass murder of the Jews of Europe. This was the revised version of World War II, in which the wisened-up Americans ran circles around their fatally gullible German overlords. It was Bilko at war, with the Germans the stand-ins for Bilko's regular flock of pigeons. If they were so smart, why hadn't the Americans, led by the calculating Colonel Hogan (Bob Crane), escaped from the clutches of monocled, hare-brained Colonel Klink (Werner Klemperer) and his jolly, roly-poly associate Schultz (John Banner)?

Gomer Pyle is *Bilko* in reverse, with Gomer (Jim Nabors) a Doberman figure getting his slow-witted revenge on the scheming Sgt. Carter (Frank Sutton). Mayberry's dimmest bulb is sent to infiltrate the US Marine Corps and kill it with kindness. Carter is a failed Bilko, outgunned by a yokel, his crew cut a landing strip for his endless worries, his mouth twisted into a permanent curl from the agony of handling Pyle. The marines are a sort of permanent summer camp here, a place to leisurely shoot the breeze, or as Gomer might say, "the bray-az." Gomer is a Forrest Gump type, bearing a distinct physical resemblance to a future sitcom military recruit: *Arrested Development's* Buster Bluth.

Bilko and Gomer and the POWs of *Hogan's Heroes* were each, in their own distinctive way, representative of the sitcom's new preferred mode: the fish-out-of-water story. A new array of backdrops heretofore unfamiliar to television were summoned in order to maximally juxtapose an array of freaks and oddballs. *The Phil Silvers Show* took place in a Kansas that was really Brooklyn; a number of these new shows, even when they were set in Beverly Hills, occupied an Appalachia of the mind.

The Beverly Hillbillies (CBS, 1962–71) was devoted to the quasi-surreal juxtaposition of the luxurious and the penurious: a misfiring Model T cruising down Rodeo Drive, a moonshine still built next to the backyard pool, a down-home wingding in a gleaming modern living room, complete with squealing pig in the kitchen. Its yokels-in-California aesthetic was lifted

from *The Real McCoys* (ABC/CBS, 1957–63), the first rural sitcom to find an audience, starring legendary character actor Walter Brennan as a font of ignorant down-home wisdom.

Hillbillies is nearly unwatchable now, a hodgepodge of faux down-home humor, squabbling womenfolk, and painful Southern California jokes. Jed (Buddy Ebsen), busted for a minor indiscretion, is told, “You do make more racket than a jackass in a tin barn,” and the same verdict could stand for the series as a whole. Yet *The Beverly Hillbillies*, all its surface flaws notwithstanding, was the top-rated show in the United States for the 1962–63 and 1963–64 seasons, and it hovered around the top ten for the bulk of its ten-season run.

The same absurdist Ruraltania was the setting of *Petticoat Junction* (CBS, 1963–70) and *Green Acres* (CBS, 1965–71), which both bear the imprint of *Hillbillies* producer Paul Henning. In *Petticoat Junction*, Bea Benaderet, *The Beverly Hillbillies*’ Cousin Pearl, was cast as a hotelier with three nubile daughters to protect from the depredations of the masculine world, enlisting her own wiles, her shotgun, and her irascible uncle Joe (Edgar Buchanan) as a last line of defense. *Petticoat Junction* is studied cornpone with a slightly absurdist tilt, courtesy of the W. C. Fields–like Buchanan and the series’ taste for musical numbers and crossover episodes with its sibling *Green Acres*.

Green Acres makes the geographic displacement of the 1960s sitcom literal, yanking European cosmopolitan Eva Gabor and her husband Eddie Albert out of New York City and moving them to the country. *Green Acres* is a rural comedy with some of the zany spirit of its contemporary *Get Smart*, channeled primarily through the figure of Arnold Ziffel—a television-loving pig who is doted on by his human “parents” and treated like a child by all the local townsfolk. Arnold communicates his grocery list to the local shopkeeper in grunts and squeals, and is warned on his way out not to play baseball with the other kids on his way home. (Arnold is close television kin to the talking horse of *Mister Ed* [syndicated/CBS, 1961–66], another exemplar of 1960s sitcoms’ interest in the humdrum surreal perhaps exemplified by those twin freakshow families, *The Munsters* [CBS, 1964–66] and *The Addams Family* [ABC, 1964–66].) Television shows grew aware of each

other's presence in the firmament. *Green Acres* characters watch *The Beverly Hillbillies* on their TV sets, even putting on a theatrical adaptation of the show at their local playhouse.

By this point, *The Phil Silvers Show* had long since reached its terminus. The series ended in 1959 after four seasons and 143 episodes, with "The Weekend Colonel." Colonel Hall has finally crafted a foolproof system for stopping his nemesis, and it involves the use of a technology we have all grown familiar with: television. Training his cameras on Bilko, the colonel catches him in all manner of indiscretions, tracking down his top-secret illicit craps game via internal security system. (Hadn't audiences been conducting the same surveillance of Bilko all along?) The colonel, it turns out, is not quite as amused by watching Bilko on television as audiences were. And Bilko's tall tales no longer hold water in this era of mass-media sophistication: "That story might have held up twenty years ago," the colonel lectures him, "because we didn't have television then." Silvers smiles foolishly at the camera when the colonel points it out, only too aware of its power to educate and mislead.

In the series' final scene, Colonel Hall sits in front of a television, enjoying the spectacle of Bilko filling his screen. He is amused less by the man than by the setting: a jail cell, where Bilko and his associates now languish. The colonel, for once, gets the last word about this TV show: "And the best part is that as long as I'm the sponsor, it'll never be canceled." Well, *almost* the last word. Before we go, we see Bilko once more, channeling Porky Pig in fond farewell to his audience: "Th-that's all, folks!"

Bilko is, at long last, being punished for his crimes against humanity, but he has learned no lessons and accepts no blame. His fate anticipates that of another troupe of amoral schemers who would close out their legendary sitcom serving their own stint in prison. Between the end of Bilko and the emergence of *Seinfeld* some three decades later, this would be the road not taken for the sitcom—a model that eschewed warmth and sentiment in favor of the cold appeal of the hustle. The sitcom would have to belatedly learn once again the lesson originally taught by Bilko: how not to be polite.