

Bilko still having last laugh after 50 years



By **Tara Conlan**
TV editor

GAMBLING-MAD Sgt Bilko first appeared on TV screens 48 years ago – and is still playing his cards right.

The Phil Silvers Show has been named the greatest-ever sitcom by the Radio Times, beating veteran favourites such as Fawlty Towers, Porridge and Hancock's Half-Hour.

More than 140 episodes were made about U.S. army sergeant Ernie Bilko, played by Silvers, and his attempts to do as little work as possible.

The show has been largely forgotten in America but is often repeated on British television.

The list of the top 20 sitcoms was compiled for the new Radio Times Guide to TV Comedy by television historian Mark Lewisohn, who judged the shows on their success and longevity.

He said: 'Sgt Bilko is sitcom's high water mark. In 2005 it'll be 50 years old and yet it's still hilarious, with great scripts and magnificent performances.'

'Seinfeld (in second place) was also outstanding and, though the 12 episodes of Fawlty Towers were sublime, to sustain such excellence year after year gives Seinfeld the nod over John Cleese.'

Nine of the top 20 shows are American, the rest are British. They include Yes, Minister, Only Fools and Horses and Dad's Army. Monty Python's Flying Circus is named best British sketch show by the guide, published later this week.

Although U.S. sitcoms take the top two spots, Mr Lewisohn said he preferred British shows.

He added: 'Americans have got the sitcom down to a fine art. There is something about the speed of the wit and the rapidity of the jokes.'

'In Britain, we signpost things and take it more slowly – you couldn't ever say Dad's Army was fast-paced.'

t.conlan@dailymail.co.uk



Cast of Seinfeld: 'Sustained excellence year after year'



Frasier: Sixth place



Porridge: Fourth place



John Cleese in Fawlty Towers: A dozen 'sublime' episodes

Phil Silvers as Bilko: 'Sitcom's high water mark'

TOP 20 SITCOMS

- 1 The Phil Silvers Show (U.S.)
- 2 Seinfeld (U.S.)
- 3 Fawlty Towers (U.K.)
- 4 Porridge (U.K.)
- 5 Yes, Minister (U.K.)
- 6 Frasier (U.S.)
- 7 MASH (U.S.)
- 8 Till Death Us Do Part (U.K.)
- 9 Hancock's Half-Hour/Hancock (U.K.)
- 10 Whatever Happened To The Likely Lads (U.K.)
- 11 The Larry Sanders Show (U.S.)
- 12 The Mary Tyler Moore Show (U.S.)
- 13 The Fall and Rise of Reginald Perrin (U.K.)
- 14 The Good Life (U.K.)
- 15 Steptoe and Son (U.K.)
- 16 Only Fools and Horses (U.K.)
- 17 Cheers (U.S.)
- 18 The Dick Van Dyke Show (U.S.)
- 19 Dad's Army (U.K.)
- 20 The Simpsons (U.S.)



Yes, Minister: Fifth place

The Phil Silvers Show

USA, CBS, Sitcom, b/w, 1955

Transmission Details

Number of episodes: 142

Length: 30 mins

US dates: 20 Sep 1955 - 19 June 1959

UK dates: 20 Apr 1957 - 2 June 1960

(129 episodes)

BBC, various days and times

Cast

Phil Silvers - Sgt Ernest G 'Ernie' Bilko

Harvey Lembeck - Cpl Rocco Barbella

Allan Melvin - Cpl Steve Henshaw

Paul Ford - Col John T Hall

Elisabeth Fraser - Sgt Joan Hogan (1955-58)

Jimmy Little - Sgt Francis Grover

Ned Glass - Sgt Andrew Pendleton (1955-56)

Harry Clark - Sgt Stanley Sowici (1955-56)

Joe E Ross - Sgt Rupert Ritzik (1956-59)

Beatrice Pons - Mrs Emma Ritzik (1956-59)

Maurice Gosfield - Pvt Duane Doberman

Herbie Faye - Pvt Sam Fender

Maurice Brenner - Pvt Fleischman

Karl Lukas - Pvt 'Stash' Kadowski

Jack Healy - Pvt Mullen

Billy Sands - Pvt Dino Paparelli

Mickey Freeman - Pvt Fielding Zimmerman

Terry Carter - Pvt Sugarman/Thompson

Hope Sansberry - Mrs Nell Hall

Nick Saunders - Capt Barker

Jim Perry - Lt Anderson (1955-56)

John Gibson - Chaplain

Walter Cartier - Pvt Claude Dillingham

Tige Andrews - Pvt Gander

Bernie Fein - Pvt Gomez

P J Sidney - Pvt Palmer

Louise Golden - WAC Edna

Billie Allen - WAC Billie

Crew

Nat Hiken - Creator/Writer

Billy Friedberg - Writer

Tony Webster - Writer

Terry Ryan - Writer

Barry Blitzer - Writer

Arnie Rosen - Writer

Coleman Jacoby - Writer

Leonard Stern - Writer

Harvey Orkin - Writer

Arnold Auerbach - Writer

Neil Simon - Writer

Sydney Zelinka - Writer

A J Russell - Writer

Al De Caprio - Director

Aaron Ruben - Director

Nat Hiken - Producer (1955-57)

Edward J Montagne - Producer (1957-59)

Phil Silvers had been around for years as the perennial 'second banana' - first in burlesque and vaudeville and then on Broadway and in the movies - when, after bringing the house down as MC of a CBS dinner in 1954, the network invited him to star in his own television comedy show. Silvers was reluctant but agreed to the proposal when CBS brought Nat Hiken into the picture. Hiken was immensely regarded in the comedy business as a radio writer for Fred Allen and Milton Berle, and for penning Martha Raye's 1953-55 TV specials. The star and the writer duly set to thinking up ideas for their show. Hiken's initial thought was to cast Silvers as a scheming army sergeant, and it was only some months later, with a table full of alternative ideas in front of them, that they returned to this and realised it could suc-

ceed. *The Phil Silvers Show* - also titled *You'll Never Get Rich* and, informally, *Bilko* and *Sgt Bilko* - was born, destined to win honours by the score, including three consecutive Emmy Awards for Best Comedy Series, and become, unarguably, one of the all-time great sitcoms. Many consider it *the* best.

Fleshed out, Ernest G Bilko, known to one and all as Ernie, was a master sergeant who would go to any lengths to beat the system, be it by conniving, bluffing, bribing, cheating, gambling, lying, finagling or any other devious device known only to him. No sharper operator ever existed than Bilko, no one more capable of fleecing his fellow man or forcing even the top brass at the Pentagon to quake. No one was beyond or safe from a Bilko operation - he could *smell* money, and he had all human life worked out, being capable not only of predicting the thoughts of others but calculating how long it would take people to think them. But Bilko had two crucial weaknesses: like all addicted gamblers, he could not resist one last flutter, and, down, deep down, *deep* deep down, resided a conscience that prevented him from making the final, ultimate move which would garner him his life's goals: wealth and physical comfort. For all his grasping, Bilko would never win.

Ernie Bilko ran the motor-pool platoon at Fort Baxter, a US Army post in Roseville, Kansas, so remote that Washington scarcely remembered it was there. Nominally, the post was run by Colonel Hall but he recognised that Bilko was really in charge, the one man who could make the post work with clockwork

precision or at the speed of molasses with a mere click of his fingers. A bumbler who was both anxious for Fort Baxter to be recognised by the top brass but keen too on the quiet life that resulted from its remoteness, Hall longed to be rid of Bilko, but, when this occasioned, he recognised immediately that Bilko was an essential part of the status quo that granted him, mostly, an easy life. Colonel Hall, and his wife Nell who was sublimely manipulated by the arch-flatterer Bilko, were but putty in the master sergeant's hands.

Bilko's principal 'pigeons', though, were the members of his platoon. Usually, US Army personnel are depicted on TV or in the movies as smart, fit, tall, handsome, virile men, eager to fight for their country and ever at the ready. Bilko's motor-pool privates were scruffy, lazy, unattractive slobs who liked to do as little work as possible, never paraded and were almost fearful of weaponry. While they dreaded Bilko's fantastic array of ideas to part them with their pay-packets they realised that resistance was useless. They knew too that although he would only just stop short of selling them into slavery, Bilko would also include them in his countless get-rich-quick schemes and protect them from the harsh realities of army life. Just like Colonel Hall, while the men were unhappy with what Bilko offered, they took comfort from knowing where they stood. Of all Bilko's platoon of hapless wonders, Pvt Duane Doberman, played by Maurice Gosfield, stood out as the ultimate in slobbery - a short, appallingly-dressed fat man with an embarrassed, round, sweaty face and high, squeaky voice. Doberman failed to grasp

the ways of the world, the ways of the barracks even, and became the ultimate 'patsy' in Bilko's schemes. Mostly, he arrived in a scene a few seconds late or spoke his line a few seconds late because he was supposed to; at other times it was because Gosfield's sense of timing was awry. As the show progressed so more and more the plotlines revolved around him - naturally, he became a huge star, reportedly developing a king-size ego to match.

Elsewhere, Bilko had less affection for the other targets of his wiles: fellow sergeants Grover, Sowici, Pendleton and, best of all, Ritzik, the klutz of a cook who perpetually lost to Bilko, causing his volatile wife Emma to become even more fractious. Also on the post were a number of WACs, including Sgt Joan Hogan with whom Bilko enjoyed/endured an on-off relationship - it was on provided that she was willing to put up with his lies and conniving, it was off if she was not.

The Phil Silvers Show hit the ground running in the autumn of 1955 - the first two episodes were sensationally good, and within a short time it was heading the ratings and ranked as the number one comedy show in the USA. In Britain, where it was unveiled 18 months later and screened out of sequence, Ernie Bilko became second only to Tony Hancock as a comedy figure of great significance in that period. The British people loved Bilko from the start and, while the show has become inexplicably forgotten in America it has remained a staple of the BBC's programming, much cherished and discussed to the present day.

Although the show has plenty to admire in all directions, it owes this long-lasting success to two essential factors. The first is the performance of Phil Silvers. Never has a comic actor been so completely identifiable with his TV persona as Silvers was with Bilko. And never before or since has a man dominated a sitcom with such comedic power. The show was written to Silvers' strengths: fast-talking, quick-witted, razor-sharp, a gambler, a leader of men. As Bilko, Silvers was never less than sensational, delivering his lines with speed and guile and marvellously ad-libbing when the situation required it. Silvers was the quintessential New York Jewish comedian, and the show - written and filmed in Manhattan - was blessed with all of the sharpness that typifies these twin centres of humour.

The second reason is Nat Hiken, another New York Jew and justifiably dubbed a genius by Silvers. Virtually all of the 71 episodes written during Hiken's tenure at the helm of *The Phil Silvers Show* represent TV comedy at its finest. What distinguished his work from that of other TV writers was his economy: what they would take sentences to express, Hiken could put across in just a few words. He also had an ability to maintain several storylines simultaneously within an episode, and the habit of introducing bizarre denouements into his scripts, almost as if he wanted to make the job harder by thinking of an improbable solution to which he must find an even more absurd premise. Hiken's *Bilko* scripts were awesome, and probably twice the length of any other US half-hour sitcom, so densely packed were the words and ideas. (Among British sitcoms, only

Fawlty Towers can rival *The Phil Silvers Show* in this regard.) Above all, Hiken held absolute faith in his belief that *Bilko* must be a New York production. The show was rehearsed in a studio above Hiken's social salon, Lindy's delicatessen on Broadway, where he revelled in the convivial company of writers and the colourful array of peripheral figures on the New York show-business scene. Picture the image of the Jewish comics and comic-writers gathered around the deli table in Woody Allen's *Broadway Danny Rose*, gassing and cracking gags, and you have Hiken and his cronies in the 1950s, shaping the great TV and Broadway shows of the time.

Recognising that the pressure of producing such scripts on a weekly basis, 35 weeks a year, would probably kill him, Nat Hiken withdrew from *The Phil Silvers Show* at the end of its second season, going to on score another notable success in 1961 with *Car 54, Where Are You?* While it carried on for a further two seasons, *Bilko* was not the same without Hiken. He had managed to deliver hilarious situations with most of his 71 episodes; after he left, CBS found maybe two or three of that calibre in the remaining 72. These later episodes, despite Silvers' unwavering brilliance and scripts from an up-and-coming young writer named Neil Simon, made significant and poor editorial changes. The entire camp was uprooted from Fort Baxter in Kansas to Camp Fremont in California; many of the storylines took place well away from army life altogether, with *Bilko* magically (yet inexplicably) transplanted into all manner of civilian situations; supporting

players whose characters the audience liked - especially Doberman and the Ritziks - were given their 'own scenes' each week; and latter episodes featured a number of famous guest stars (Lucille Ball, the Crosbys, Mickey Rooney and others) in the hope of arresting a ratings slide. With one final throw of the dice, or perhaps beset by a complete absence of ideas, the writers made Corporal Henshaw turn against *Bilko*. For 130-odd episodes he had been an adoring, admiring aide and accomplice in his Sarge's schemes and scams; suddenly (again without explanation) he was against him, frowning upon the fleecing, voicing his criticism. Watching the last few episodes is, with few relieving moments, like seeing a once majestic, Emmy-monopolising thoroughbred limping towards the knacker's yard. The end came in the summer of 1959 when CBS pulled the plug so it could sell the show into syndication while it was still 'hot'. (The last scene in the final episode has *Bilko* in jail, finally landed there by Colonel Hall, stuttering 'Th-th-that's all folks!') Silvers' post-*Bilko* career went downhill rapidly, and, apart from spots in *Car 54*, few of the remaining cast were ever seen again. (Alan Alda, Fred Gwynne and Dick Van Dyke all went on from *Bilko* guest appearances when unknown to greater fame, however.) Phil Silvers died on 1 November 1985, age 74, by all accounts a broken and bitter man. For four years in the 1950s he had caught the lightning but then it had slipped through his fingers.

Of the modern-day sitcoms only *Seinfeld* and *Frasier* have come close to matching the impeccable qualities of the early *Bilko* epi-

sodes - especially *Seinfeld*, which, *a la* Hiken's work, intentionally added seemingly irrelevant plot strands into a storyline and then neatly tied them all up at the end. And yet these throne-pretenders may not stand the test of time as *Bilko* has, for the best Hiken-written episodes are already approaching 50 years old. For its legions of dedicated fans, watching a great *Bilko* episode is like spending half an hour in the company of an old and dear friend: you may know the lines by heart, you may know the plots, you may remember where the boom microphone accidentally drops into the camera's view - speed and *feel*, not technical perfection, were the bywords in the 1950s - but you sit there and laugh every time, admiring Silvers' breathtaking performance and gasping at the speed of the action and the sheer brilliance of it all. Although it finished in 1959, *The Phil Silvers Show* remains the benchmark against which all great sitcoms must be measured.

Notes. Spin-offs have been surprisingly few. The Hanna-Barbera children's cartoon show *Top Cat* (USA, 1961-62; screened as *Boss Cat* in the UK by the BBC from 16 May 1962) is clearly fashioned on *The Phil Silvers Show*, depicting the adventures of a bunch of alley cats led by the wily and opportunistic Top Cat, always outsmarting the local policeman Officer Dibble (the Colonel Hall figure) but never able to grab the supreme prize: money, luxury and an escape from pavement life. Emphasising the similarity between *Top Cat* and *Bilko*, Maurice Gosfield voiced the part of Benny The Ball, a dumb moggy modelled closely on Du-

ane Doberman. In 1995 the British actor/writer/director Jonathan Lynn (the co-writer of *Yes Minister* among numerous other credits) went to Hollywood to direct a feature film version, titled *Sgt Bilko*, which starred Steve Martin in the lead role and updated the format to a modern-day army post. Compared with the original, the film was bound to be found wanting, but it did have a few high spots and, at the very least, its release finally (though temporarily) rejuvenated US interest in what had become virtually a forgotten show there, with cable TV station Nick At Nite screening original 1950s episodes to perhaps three generations of Americans who had never before set eyes on perhaps their country's finest sitcom.

Nat Hiken named Bilko after a minor league US baseball player, Steve Bilko, whom he admired, happy with the connotation that it also gave of being bilked (ie, cheated). So too were Bilko's platoon members named after sportsmen - Paparelli was a baseball umpire, Barbella was the real name of the boxer Rocky Graziano (who at one point before the show began was going to play the role) and other boxing names, as well as genuine boxers, populated the cast.

The BBC has several times programmed extended runs of *The Phil Silvers Show* repeats - beginning 23 October 1966, 14 April 1973, 31 August 1979, 7 November 1984 and 3 October 1993, with episodes shown *ad hoc* since then, right up to the time of writing - but one episode, 'Bilko's Merry Widow', remains unseen on British TV (although it has been issued in the UK on video). There was also a one-hour

Bilko-themed TV special - *Keep In Step*.

Phil Silvers and Maurice Gosfield appeared together, in character, in a specially recorded greeting to the BBC, screened by the channel on the 21st anniversary of the launch of British television, 2 November 1957, during a programme titled *The World Our Stage*. The Bilko Platoon, so called, were guests in an edition of the US TV show *The Perry Como Music-Hall*, screened by the BBC on 6 January 1960. On 31 December 1984 BBC2 paid homage to *The Phil Silvers Show* with the celebratory salute *Bilko On Parade*, narrated by Kenneth Williams and featuring clips from the show.

Researched and written by Mark Lewisohn.