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WITH VIDEO

Soupy Sales, slapstick legend for generation, dies

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Soupy Sales, the rubber-faced comedian who made an art form out of taking a pie in the face and delighted a generation of Detroiters with his loopy TV show on Channel 7 in the 1950s, died Thursday night in New York.

Sales, who had been in ill health for several years, was 83. His former manager, Dave Usher, said Sales last week entered a Bronx hospice, where he died. He is survived by his wife, Trudy, and two sons, Hunt and Tony.

"He was the first person from Detroit television whose first name had instant recognition from coast to coast," said former Channel 7 anchorman Bill Bonds. "If you said 'Soupy' in New York, they knew who it was. If you said 'Soupy' in Los Angeles, everybody knew who it was. I'd worked in both markets, and the first thing anybody said when I mentioned I was from Detroit was 'Soupy.' "

Born Milton Supman in Franklinton, N.C., and raised in West Virginia, Sales was best known to Detroiters as the goofy yet cerebral host of "Lunch with Soupy," a half-hour show that featured Sales hamming it up in a variety of sometimes surreal situations.

The show, which began airing in Detroit in 1953, featured a cast of unforgettable characters: an incorrigible dog by the name of White Fang, "the meanest dog in all Deeeetroit," who communicated via a series of guttural noises; Black Tooth, an overly affectionate dog whom Sales would constantly tell "don't kiss"; Hippy the Hippo, and Willy the Worm.

Of course, there were the pies. Sales once estimated that he took 9,000 pies in the face during the course of his career.

But the most famous of Sales' bits was "lunch." A typical menu might include a hot dog as the main course. Before Sales would take a bite, viewers would hear the sound of squealing pigs. Or, viewers might hear the sound of mooing cows as Sales sipped milk.

The lunchtime show was also known for its unpredictability. Sales would leave the set, camera in tow, and harass other Channel 7 hosts.

He once left the set in mid-show and hunted down Channel 7's Edythe Fern Melrose, a woman of unyielding dignity who was known as "The Lady of Charm." Sales blasted her with a pie.

"She didn't know it was coming," once recalled former Detroit radio personality Mark Andrews, himself since deceased, who watched the program as a grade-school student at Fraser's Eisenhower Elementary. "It might be the funniest moment I've seen on television."

The show was "must-see" TV, long before NBC came up with the phrase. Thousands of Detroit baby

boomers would become “Birdbaths,” the designation given to members of his club.

Tom De Lisle, a Detroit writer and TV producer, once recalled to the Free Press growing up on Detroit's east side and watching the show. He and his brother, Skip, lived close enough to their grade school that they could go home for lunch to watch Sales.

“We calculated that we could catch the last joke on the show and make it back to our desks by the time the bell rang if we ran like hell. And that's what we did,” recalled De Lisle. “We stood in the doorway, hung right to the last second of Soupy's show, said ‘Go!’ and ran. The show was creative, different and live every day.”

With the success of the noontime show, Channel 7 quickly developed a nighttime show, “Soupy's On,” for the 11 p.m. time period.

“Soupy's On” was a comedy-variety show, with Sales performing sketch comedy with a team of local actors and actresses. He also regularly featured the best jazz performers of the day, including Charlie Parker, Miles Davis and Thelonious Monk.

Sales created a multitude of characters for his evening show: Charles Vichyssoise, a slippery French crooner who was forever sparring with unruly patrons at the Club Chi Chi; Wyatt Burp, and Ernest Hemingbone, who argued with his literary rivals.

Sales later admitted that the pace of doing a noon show and a 11 p.m. live comedy program — one hour of live television, five days a week — contributed to the breakup of his marriage, played havoc with his family life and left him exhausted.

But he made serious money for Channel 7 — so much money that Sales could be credited with saving the American Broadcasting Company, which owned the station, in addition to the ABC-TV network. At the time, ABC was struggling and relied heavily on its owned-and-operated stations in cities like Detroit, where Sales was raking it in.

Sales left Detroit in late 1959 and ended up at KABC-TV, the ABC-owned station in Los Angeles.

“I thought it was time to move on because I didn't want to be 60, 65 and be sitting around one night having a drink and wonder if I could have made it in another market,” he wrote in his autobiography, “Soupy Sez.”

After Detroit, Sales hosted children's shows in New York and Los Angeles. Frank Sinatra asked to appear on the Sales show in Los Angeles and take a pie in the face.

When Sinatra appeared on the set, a director offered the singer a tour of the set. “Don't bother,” Sinatra reportedly said, “I know the show better than you do.”

Sales' L.A. show ran between 1961 and 1963, but was canceled because local television was moving from live, locally produced TV to syndicated material.

But Sales had one more go-around with children's television, at New York's WNEW-TV between 1964 and 1967, where he got into trouble for jokingly asking his fans to send him money.

Sales was suspended for the stunt, but reinstated after massive demonstrations in front of WNEW-TV studios.

Sales left Channel 5 in New York in 1968 after years of fighting with station management.

His attitude about station managers, which remained unchanged until his death, was that TV

executives ruined television. He said that most station managers would not “know a tap dancer from a trombone player,” and that their primary contribution was “getting drunk on their six-martini lunches.”

His mark on television remained well into the 1980s and beyond. New York Times critic John J. O'Connor noted in 1986 that Pee-wee Herman's act could be traced back to Sales.

Said Channel 7 anchorman Erik Smith: “He was our youth. He was my lunch every day. He was my Jell-O. He had that profound an impact as an individual as anybody in the history of Detroit television. I still find myself doing some of his mannerisms. And I'm still a proud Birdbath.”

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