

# THE LEGENDARY BILKO

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The late 1950s were halcyon years for American cinema and tv comedy. On the silver screen, Rock Hudson and Doris Day had a string of smash hits; Bob Hope and Bing Crosby were still on the road; and Curtis and Lemmon, with the aid of Monroe, were camping it up in *Some Like It Hot*. At the same time, the advent of mass tv gave rise to a number of long-running success stories, like the Ed Sullivan Show; Lucille Ball's *Love Lucy*; and, for many, the funniest of them all - Phil Silvers' portrayal of the incorrigible *Sergeant Bilko*.

It is hard to believe the extent to which American tv funnies have gone down the drain since then. The garbage of the 1980s - *Cheers*, *Taxi* and the *Mork & Mindy* show, all of which are about as funny as toothache - must have the late Jack Benny turning in his grave. To borrow a phrase once used to describe the novels of Harold Robbins: they are chewing gum for the mind.

Silvers' legendary *Bilko* was altogether more substantial fare. The show became an instant hit because in farcical terms it captured the mood of the time. Yet, 30 years on, the reruns retain all the sparkle the creators intended. A cliché it may be, but class acts don't tarnish. The brilliance of the *Bilko* scriptwriters was to take the conventional order of things, and stand it on its head. With a military man - President Eisenhower - running America, Bilko represented the voice of the cynical ranks below. In those crisp one-liners, Bilko let them know who was *really* running the show - and they loved him for it. At his fictional Kansas army base, Fort Baxter, the flabby and bald-headed Bilko was king. Nothing moved without his say so. For those wanting parties or pass-outs, women or wine, Ernie Bilko was the man to see: a ubiquitous Mr Fix-It who did nothing for nothing, and took a cut in everything worth anything.

Above him, in rank only, was the bumbling Colonel Hall, ever-ready to be fooled by one of Bilko's money-making ruses; ever-nervous that Bilko was about to con him rotten. In outwitting the establishment, Bilko never needed excuses: he always had a perfectly good reason. Other

characters in the show were ideal stooges for Bilko's self-interested schemes. Like the pea-brained GI Doberman, who believed everything his sergeant told him, but who never saw him dealing off the bottom of the pack; and the blonde woman officer who knew Ernie would never marry her, but who strove relentlessly to get him on the hook.

It has been said that Silvers' *Bilko* paved the way for the hugely successful film and tv series of the next generation - *MASH*.



Like *Bilko*, it was about life in the US army during the 1950s. But whereas the humour of *MASH* reflected the smart-arsed modernism of the 1960s, Ernie Bilko's appeal was pure burlesque.

Phil Silvers, ne Silver, was one of eight children born into a family of poor Russian immigrants in Brooklyn, New York. If his formal education lacked substance - he left school at 12 - his training in the art of comedy was straight out of the top drawer. As a young teenager, he made his debut in vaudeville, after which he worked as a nightclub comedian, and then toured with the famous Minsky troupe. His break into big-time movies came at the age of 29 in 1941 when he had a minor role in *Tom, Dick and Harry*. Other films followed, but true stardom arrived when he was cast to play the fast-talking, work-shirking *Sergeant Bilko* who knew a sucker when he saw one and gave none of them an even break. On the face of it, the Sergeant was not a pleasant character. But Silvers' treatment of the role made Ernie Bilko one of tv's most lovable rogues.

Just how much of Silvers' own personality went into the creation of Bilko is a matter for conjecture. Undoubtedly, both were enthusiastic gamblers - the difference being that Bilko always had the cards marked, and the odds loaded in his favour. Such was the popular appeal of the *Bilko* show that between 1955 and 1959 it ran to 140 episodes. But like many performers associated with one inimitable character, Silvers found it nigh impossible to become anyone else. Just as in this country, Warren Mitchell is inextricably linked with pipe-smoking Alf Garnett, to millions of Americans Phil Silvers will always be the mercurial Bilko.

Of Silvers' later work, the best by far was his appearance in the 1960s cinema comedy *It's a Mad Mad Mad World*. He starred with many other big-name performers, but for me his performance surpassed them all. After the new Phil Silvers show failed to take off in 1964, largely because the public could not accept him playing a factory worker, he went into semi-retirement, although he continued to appear regularly on chat shows both sides of the Atlantic.

Phil Silvers may have died last month, but the memory of *Sergeant Bilko* lives on. And the tv repeats will keep us laughing for many years to come.

*BBC2 hope to be screening the Sergeant Bilko series early in 1986.*