



**Sara K. Eskridge.** *Rube Tube: CBS and Rural Comedy in the Sixties.* Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2018. 254 pp. \$50.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8262-2165-0.

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If one were to gauge the state of the nation in the 1960s based on the prime time shows presented on CBS, one would be totally unaware that the United States was being wracked by social change produced by the civil rights movement, the Vietnam War, and the rising tide of baby-boomers entering their late teens and early twenties. Indeed, the lily-white, folksy, and often wacky comedies that dominated the CBS line-up located in rural places such as Mayberry or Hooterville depicted an escapist world dominated by salt-of-the-earth southern stereotypes with nary a hint of political controversy, hippies, civil rights activists, or even nonwhites of any variety. Historian Sara K. Eskridge explores these rural comedies, their popularity, and the reasons CBS aired them in the first place in *Rube Tube: CBS and Rural Comedy in the Sixties*.

In the 1950s, CBS was known for its cutting-edge programming and gained a reputation as the “Tiffany Network.” However, the network’s propensity to hire liberal newscasters like Edward R. Murrow and programming that featured Jews, immigrants, and even African Americans attracted the scrutiny of the House Un-American Activities Committee and civilian anticommunist organizations like the Veterans Action Committee. Indeed, during this period many Americans began referring to CBS as the Communist Broadcasting

System. In addition, Eskridge notes, scandals around game shows and concerns over violence in TV westerns in the late 1950s led CBS “to look for something new—something inoffensive yet entertaining to a broad swath of the population” (p. 9)

That “something new” for CBS became a wave of rural comedies that bridged the 1960s, from *The Andy Griffith Show*, which first aired in 1960, to *Hee Haw*, which the network canceled in a purge of its rural programming in 1971. In between, shows such as *The Beverly Hillbillies*, *Petticoat Junction*, and *Green Acres* filled the CBS prime time line-up and held the top ranks in the Nielsen ratings. As Eskridge notes, these shows proved to be a win-win situation for the network as they “served as a peacemaker between CBS and the public” and, in turn, made it “the undisputed ruler of network television” (p. 9). As Eskridge observes, “In less than one decade, CBS went from the ‘Communist Broadcasting System’ to the ‘Country Broadcasting System’” (p. 93).

While Eskridge traces the rise of the rural comedy to Cold War concerns, she uses much of the book to explore the reasons for their remarkable popularity with the American public. Of course, the shows were popular (and still are) with white southerners. For many southerners they offered an important counterpoint to the im-

age of angry white southerners spouting racism and opposing civil rights constantly on display in the news media during the 1960s. As Eskridge notes, “Regardless of how people outside the South felt, white southerners could look at the images of themselves as portrayed in rural comedy and believe that they were good, salt-of-the-earth people” (p. 94).

But the shows were also popular outside the South and Eskridge points to a variety of reasons for this. For some, the often ridiculous depictions of southern hillbillies provided an othering “mudsill to make viewers feel better about themselves” (p. 141). Eskridge also echoes the observations of many critics who see such shows as an escapist antidote and a safe haven in the midst of tumultuous and rapidly changing times. Eskridge calls these shows a “slice of Americana triggering nostalgia for simpler times and stronger morals” (p. 141).

Perhaps the strongest part of the book is chapter 6, “Rural Comedy and the Race-Free South.” In this chapter Eskridge explores CBS’s “almost stubborn commitment to maintaining entirely white casts” in its rural comedies, despite their supposed location in places with significant African American populations (p. 138). While the networks often blamed this lack of diversity on “southern racial standards,” the fact that they maintained “all-white casts long past the point when it was expected” meant that they were “giving those cultural values their seal of approval” (p. 139). As Eskridge observes, for far too many Americans across the nation, CBS’s rural comedies provided a “safe place where white viewers could guarantee a world populated by white characters” (p. 141).

My one criticism of this work is that Eskridge tends to lump all of the rural comedies into a single category and ignores important unique characteristics of individual shows. I would especially point to two worthy of note; *Green Acres* and *The Andy Griffith Show*. While definitely rural, *Green*

*Acres* has a decidedly postmodern spin that separates it from the other shows. Film critic Armond White has compared the show to the absurdist dramas of Samuel Beckett and Eugene Ionesco. As a show that has never been off the air since it debuted in 1960, *The Andy Griffith Show* also seems somehow different in its timeless quality.

Grounded in extensive research at the National Archives, Library of Congress, the Performing Arts Special Collections at UCLA, and the digital archives of the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences, *Rube Tube* effectively explores an important era in American popular culture. Eskridge is especially insightful in elucidating the variety of factors that made rural comedies such an important, and in some ways surprising, part of the cultural landscape of the 1960s. I highly recommend this book to those interested in media history, southern history, and the history of the 1960s.

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