

Live from California

Beverly Hills gets own version of NY broadcast museum

By Gary Dretzka
TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

BEVERLY HILLS, Calif.—With much of the history of television already on constant display on cable television, it might seem superfluous to open another institution to celebrate the broadcast industry even further—especially here in Southern California.

Nonetheless, the West Coast branch of the Museum of Television & Radio opened its doors last month on a busy corner of tony Beverly Hills (yes, its zip code is 90210). The long-awaited \$14 million facility shares with its rather more austere 20-year-old sibling—on West 52nd Street in New York—access to more than 75,000 programs, news clips and commercials, as well as special exhibitions and seminars.

(Chicagoans can revisit their media memories at the Museum of Broadcast Communications at the Cultural Center on Michigan Avenue.)

With the flick of a mouse, it's now possible to sail through seven decades of broadcast entertainment and recorded history.

Already exhausted the repertoire of "I Love Lucy" and "The Honeymooners" on the superstations? Then feel free to spend time here with Orson Welles' Mercury Theater, FDR's Fireside Chats, the reporting of Edward R. Murrow, Ernie Kovacs' groundbreaking comedy, Babe Ruth, Howdy Doody, Rocky and Bullwinkle, Garry Moore, Carol Burnett, Ed Sullivan, Stan Freberg, Barbra Streisand or Molly Goldberg.

Less a museum than an audio-video library, the 23,000-square-foot Museum of Television & Radio isn't the kind of place where visitors can stroll among antique consoles and galleries full of electronic artifacts. Instead, they'll find several comfortable screening and listening rooms, a plush lecture hall, a radio broadcast studio and a library, where computers will allow almost instant perusal of the archives.

"This is a library of programming and the creative product, and a museum that actively interprets that collection," said museum president Robert Batscha, after a preview tour of the facility.

Batscha says that the New York museum—which, in 1991, moved into a new \$55 million building named for founder William S. Paley—doesn't keep statistics as to what percentage of its guests visit to conduct research and how many come just for the fun of seeing or hearing old shows and political documents.

He does know, however, that many in the creative community have used the archives to inform



Grant Mudford photo

The interior of the Museum of Television & Radio, which opened its doors last month in Beverly Hills.

their film, TV or theater projects. For example, Oscar-nominee Joan Allen says she based much of her portrayal of Pat Nixon on tapes she found in the New York museum, including a Barbara Walters interview.

"I think this building is going to be a focal point for people who are going to be doing roles with some kind of historical significance," said Norman Pattiz, a trustee and president of Westwood One radio network. "It will be far more convenient for a lot of them to be here."

Of course, many Los Angeles-based entertainers—who just happen to be in the neighborhood—are likely to show up just to examine their electronic legacies.

"We know that a lot of books have been written in the museum, and on a variety of different topics—not just about television and radio," added Batscha. "If you're doing research on World War II, you have to come and listen to our broadcast collection because that was a radio war. If you want to do Vietnam, then you have to come and look at our television collection."

It's fashionable to knock the commercial media for the banality

of such programming as "Married With Children" and for encouraging the celebrityhood of overblown characters such as Howard Stern and Rush Limbaugh. Still, by separating the wheat from the chaff in popular culture, it is also possible for educators to create a portrait of 20th Century America.

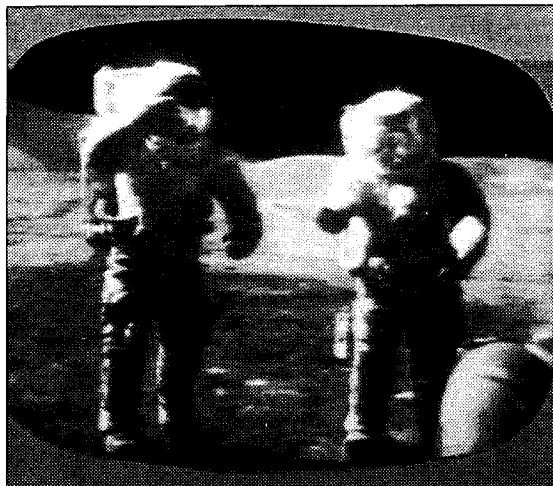
"We work very closely with teachers," said Batscha. "For instance, if a class is studying the change in attitudes toward women from the post-World War II period, they could look at Lucy, who couldn't get a job; to Marlo Thomas, in 'That Girl,' who had the nerve to want a career before she was married; to Mary Tyler Moore, who was living on her own; to the audacity of Murphy Brown."

Physically, New York's Museum of Television & Radio—housed in a 17-story building designed by Philip Johnson—reflects the upward trajectory of its midtown Manhattan neighborhood and exudes a stately, almost formal, air. The sleek, Modernist California structure, designed by Richard Meier and named for longtime ABC head Leonard Goldenson, has a much sunnier personality throughout.

The white corner building is



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Scenes from museum exhibits (clockwise from upper right): The historic 1969 lunar landing of Apollo 11 in "Witness to History"; comedian Lenny Bruce in "Standup Comedians on Television"; and deejay Alan Freed in "Rock 'n' Roll and Radio."

distinguished by its geometrically diverse facade, liberal use of travertine stone and large picture windows that allow pedestrians to observe activity in the spacious lower galleries. The distinctive, three-story rotunda lobby serves as the eye of an information storm, surrounded by a Circular Gallery and angular promenade that leads to the Library and Console Center.

"Philip Johnson gave us a building that was very much New York," Batscha explained. "We wanted a building in Los Angeles that would fit the character of the city, enjoy the light and location ... and also reflect permanence and the value of our collection."

That result is a visually stimulating structure that is highly functional and architecturally compatible with its Beverly Hills milieu.

"This isn't the transplanting of a New York institution to Los Angeles," concurred trustee Pattiz. "Even though the museum has been located in New York for 20 years, there's been a very strong and vital contingent of West Coast participation. This is the natural expansion of the idea."

"Once the success of the New York facility was assured, and the new building was built there, then it became very important for those of us who were out on this coast that a presence be developed here."

Tourism is encouraged and can be great fun, especially if visitors prepare in advance for the museum experience and know

what they want to pursue. Be advised, though, that—unlike Chicago's folksier Museum of Broadcast Communications—the New York and Los Angeles institutions promote their links to the creative and business communities, and, as such, often reflect the pretensions of the largely bicoastal industry and its intensely trendy neighborhood.

Practically every nook and cranny of the privately financed new museum is named for a broadcast-industry heavyweight who has donated \$100,000 or more. (At presstime, the colorfully planted Roof Garden—with a spectacular view of the Hollywood Hills—still was available for sponsorship.)

Among those immortalized with dedicated square footage are Grant Tinker, the Spellings, the Bochcos, Bud Yorkin, the Wolpers, the Marshalls, Danny Thomas and Diane English and Joel Shukovsky.

Legend has it that English—creator of "Murphy Brown"—was an early visitor to the original Museum of Television & Radio in New York. She wanted to learn how to pitch a script but, once inside, decided to sample some of the programming on display.

Twenty years later, the names of her and her husband appear at the maple information center, under a multiscreen video display of the museum's bounties.

Chicago's Museum of Broadcast Communications also reflects its media environment. But, unlike

the other facilities, it takes a more participatory approach to radio and television history, of which Chicago played a key role.

"We're more Midwest: folksy, people-oriented," said museum president Bruce DuMont, who also hosts a nationally syndicated political talk show. "The museums in New York and California are really for people in the industry, first and foremost."

"The museum in Chicago is for people who watch television."

Nearly 180,000 visitors are attracted annually to the MBC's galleries, exhibitions and hosted functions. But it, too, is deeply involved in targeted research, with 15 major projects being conducted there.

"Where we differ," DuMont explained, "is that we have, from the very beginning, felt that there has to be a hands-on aspect. This means we use vintage radios and television receivers as part of how we present things."

"In addition, we have a working studio, where we produce programs that people can participate in to see what it's like to be a television newscaster or a radio disc jockey."

The Museums of Television & Radio will share about 45,000 television programs, 20,000 radio shows and 10,000 commercials.

The museums also will be able to conduct bicoastal seminars, via satellite, and transmit lectures to other educational institutions from the state-of-the-art John H.

Museum

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Mitchell Theater.

The earliest radio tape is from a 1920 speech by Franklin Roosevelt, when he was secretary of the Navy. The earliest examples of television include a soundless piece of film shot off a 1938 broadcast, "Poverty Is Not a Crime on the Streets of New York," and a 1949 Toscanini concert.

The 75,000 entries in the collections may sound like an imposing amount of material, but it represents only a small fraction of available recorded programming. Obviously, the line had to be drawn somewhere.

"We have three criteria: first, artistic excellence—what's the best?" Batscha said. "Second, historical significance—television and radio have documented the 20th Century. For example, we have all the presidential inaugural addresses since they were recorded.

' ' T h i r d , s o c i a l impact—programs that have caught the attention of the American public at a certain point in time. We have representations of all the popular programs."

Some treasures have eluded curators, however. They're still searching for film of Johnny Carson's first "Tonight" show, a sound recording of the first Major League All-Star Game broadcast in 1933 from Comiskey Park and early teleplays by Rod Serling and Gore Vidal—even, incredibly, tapes of the first two Super Bowl telecasts.

Television curator Ronald Simon said he'd love to see more programming from before 1947, when kinescopes began to be commonly used. He also is on the hunt for recordings of Ernie Kovacs' early Philadelphia shows and an "Open End" discussion among Serling, Kovacs and director John Frankenheimer, artists "who created a whole different language for television."

"We have the benefit that a lot of museums don't have, of not only just collecting the historically significant but those things that really reflect the culture," Batscha said. "Often when you go to a museum and see a piece of sculpture, you'll know it's by Michelangelo but you won't know about life at the time."

The first special attractions here include "Standup Comedians on Television," a screening series and seminars; "Rock 'n' Roll and Radio," a listening series that examines the music's impact on the medium; an international children's television festival; "Star Trek: The Tradition Continues," which showcases the costumes and facial appliances from the various series; and dozens of Al Hirschfeld drawings of media legends.


Batscha said there's a close relationship between Chicago's Museum of Broadcast Communications and his two institutions.

DuMont, though, has stopped waiting for Chicago's media icons to be widely saluted for their contributions to broadcasting. For decades, the city has exported more than its fair share of actors, writers, talkshow hosts, newscasters and sitcom settings.

"Like many in the television industry, they'll just fly over Chicago," said DuMont, with a hint of resignation obvious even in a phone conversation. "Since we first began, we've talked with New York about doing something saluting the Chicago School. They've chosen not to do anything as of yet."

Curator Simon says he sympathizes with DuMont's position, noting the role played by such influential figures as Dave Garroway and a show like "Studs' Place." Still, it's unlikely the situation will change anytime soon, and other cities are advised to follow Chicago's lead by not waiting for official recognition from New York and L.A.

"As we get into the 21st Century," Simon said, "every city will have a museum dedicated to local broadcast history."

 *The wheelchair-accessible Museum of Television & Radio is located at 465 N. Beverly Dr., Beverly Hills. It is open Wednesdays through Sundays from noon to 5 p.m., and until 9 p.m. on Thursdays (310-786-1000). Suggested adult admission is \$6; students and senior citizens, \$4; and children under 13, \$3. Parking is available in the building and nearby.*

The New York museum, at 25 W. 52nd St., is open Tuesdays through Sundays from noon to 6 p.m., until 8 p.m. on Thursdays and 9 p.m. on Fridays (212-621-6800). Public transportation is advised.

The wheelchair-accessible Museum of Broadcast Communications, in the Cultural Center at Michigan Avenue and Washington Street, is open Mondays through Saturdays from 10 a.m.-4:30 p.m., Sunday from noon-5 p.m. and closed on all holidays. Admission is free (312-629-6000).