

Would You Believe?: Celebrating TV's "Get Smart" on its 50th Anniversary

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*“The fact that we aren’t preparing an anniversary celebration of **My Mother the Car** or **Captain Nice** is an indication of how many shows are deemed dispensable while a handful of others such as **Get Smart** resonate for generations to come.” — Lee Pfeiffer*

Would you believe... **Get Smart** has turned 50? **The Digital Bits** is pleased to commemorate the golden anniversary of the premiere of **Get Smart**, the classic 60s era comedy series that spoofed the popular secret agent genre. Starring Don Adams as the unforgettable Maxwell Smart and Barbara Feldon as the beautiful and brilliant Agent 99, the series originally ran in prime time from 1965 to 1970 (four seasons on NBC plus an additional season on CBS) and since then has enjoyed a steady syndication and home-video afterlife. [\[Read more here...\]](#)

The Emmy-winning show, which premiered 50 years ago this week, was created by comedy legends Mel Brooks and Buck Henry, and also featured Edward Platt as The Chief and several memorable supporting and guest players including Bernie Kopell, Stacy Keach, Joe Sirola, Dick Gautier as well as countless comedians and celebrities.

To celebrate the occasion, **The Bits** features a reflective Q&A with a quartet of **Get Smart** enthusiasts—**Carl Birkmeyer** (WouldYouBelieve.com), **Lee Pfeiffer** (Editor-in-Chief of **Cinema Retro** magazine), **Paul Scrabo** (Emmy-winning video engineer) and **Nate Sears** (performer and event manager)—who along with Laura Gagnon and Lorcan Ortway this past week produced a 50th anniversary celebration of the show at New York’s legendary Theatre 80

St. Marks. The event featured Barbara Feldon, the only surviving main cast member, as the guest of honor, as well as Joe Sirola who played memorable villains in a couple of classic episodes.

The Bits caught up with the group a few days prior to the event. (The interviews were conducted separately and have been edited into a "roundtable" conversation format.)



Michael Coate (The Digital Bits): In what way is **Get Smart** worthy of celebration on its 50th anniversary?

Carl Birkmeyer: I think the most important way it's worthy is because people want to celebrate it. Think about that for a minute. Fifty years after a show debuted, it still has fans and those fans still want to connect with the show and the people involved in the show. Amazing. Its humor has held the test of time and we should celebrate quality whenever we can.

Lee Pfeiffer: *Get Smart* is the type of situation comedy we just don't see any more. I don't want to sound like a prude, but today's shows are just about how many sleazy jokes can be stuffed into a half hour (or probably nine minutes, which is about all that is left after commercials). *Get Smart* was the brainchild of two comedic geniuses: Mel Brooks and Buck Henry. Consequently, every episode seemed to get the TLC it needed to ensure it was smartly written, produced and directed. It would be hard to find episodes that didn't live up to those standards of excellence.

Nate Sears: I think many fans of Retro-TV can likely sing the tune to one show or another; *Gilligan's Island*, *The Beverly Hillbillies*, *Green Acres*, the tune to *I Dream of Jeannie* and *Bewitched*. How many people, even to this day, can maybe hum the tune to *Get Smart*? A few perhaps, maybe even a lot. But how many quote catch phrases like, "sorry about that, Chief," "missed it by that much," or "would you believe" and don't even know where it came from? Those quirky quotes along with a dozen or so more and other "bits" from the show became pop culture staples starting 50 years ago and are still used commonly today?

Coate: Can you recall when you first saw the show?

Birkmeyer: I was probably ten or twelve and I started watching the show in reruns. I would try and talk my parents into scheduling dinner around the show, which never worked, but didn't stop me. If *Get Smart* was on at six, I wanted dinner at six-thirty!

Pfeiffer: I can't recall the first time I saw the show. There was a glut of Bond-inspired TV series in the mid-1960s and I was hooked on most of them: *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.*, *Secret Agent* (aka *Danger Man*, which actually preceded Bond), *The Wild Wild West*, *Mission: Impossible*, *I Spy*—they were all favorites of mine. I think the genius of *Get Smart* is that the show captured the larger-than-life elements of those programs and combined them in a way that gently satirized them. That was difficult to do because some of the programs, such as *U.N.C.L.E.* and *Wild Wild West* were somewhat satirical in nature as it was. *Get Smart* was "must-see" TV in the truest sense. It reflected an era in which families would watch the same programs together. TV actually helped increase the dynamics among family members unlike today when everyone seems to watch programming in isolation.

Paul Scrabo: I was there for the very first show and it exceeded all my expectations. This was the "perfect storm" for me; I was a Bond fan, and also fan of the previous Leonard Stern show *I'm Dickens, He's Fenster*. I thought Don Adams was great on *The Jimmy Dean Show* and *The Bill Dana Show*, where he played Byron Glick, a house detective, who was an earlier version of Maxwell Smart. And to top it off, there is Barbara Feldon, who we were all in love



with via the Top Brass commercials!

Sears: In my youth at age 10 I saw **Moonraker** in the theater and I thought James Bond was the end all be all, even better than **Star Wars**. Prior to that though, at around age 8 or 9, I was introduced to **Get Smart** in re-runs on TV 38 WSBK in Boston, a UHF channel (remember those?). At that age I had no idea that the show was a social and political satire let alone a spoof of the spy genre. But what a testament to the writers, cast, and directors that the goofball slapstick humor and the relationships of the characters alone could be so captivating, I loved it! Leonard Stern, the show's Executive Producer for the run of the show and consultant or producer of its future incarnations (not counting the 2008 film) said that the show appealed to sophisticates and lovers of slapstick alike. How true! As an adult I went on to discover the layers of satire and further enjoy the sometimes subtle and often overt gags and jokes even more.



Coate: Where do you think **Get Smart** ranks among 1960s era TV shows?

Birkmeyer: Tough one. I don't think you can compare comedy and drama so I'll answer it differently. I think the two best comedies to come out of the 60's were **Get Smart** and **The Dick Van Dyke Show**. I think that both of those shows are still funny today and that's the key to their success. You don't see people holding reunions for **Captain Nice**.

Pfeiffer: The show's legacy is apparent. If you say **Get Smart** to virtually anyone of any age, they are aware of the premise of the show. Some of the younger people know it from the big screen feature film of recent years. It's a pity that vintage shows like **Get Smart** don't get wide exposure in syndication any more. The premise and humor is timeless. **Get Smart** ranks among the best shows of the 1960s and early 70s. I also wouldn't hesitate to call it one of the best sitcoms ever.

Scrabo: The mid-60s were the time of the spy shows (**The Man from U.N.C.L.E.**, **I Spy**, even **Wild Wild West**), but I do think **Get Smart** is the most fondly remembered. Even when the show was exhausted, we were not through with Don or Barbara. We wanted to see them again.

Sears: Would you believe number 32? Would you believe 27? How about number 1? I am biased!



Coate: Which episodes were your favorites?

Birkmeyer: I have always loved **The Not-So-Great Escape** from season four. Laugh out loud funny with the appropriate amount of silliness and smart humor. The scenes between Don and Bernie Kopell are brilliant. However, I have to go with **A Man Called Smart** as the best. Originally scheduled as a **Get Smart** movie, the show is brilliant from start to finish. The perfect physical comedy with the revolving doors, the dialogue between Max and the bellman over the phone calls, and the parody swordfight at the end of the episode is amazing. One of Leonard Stern's best works.

Pfeiffer: I'm prejudiced when it comes to favorite episodes. They are **Bronzefinger** and **Satan Place**, both excellent in their own right. However, I have a great deal of sentiment for them because my old friend Joe Sirola played the villains Bronzefinger

and Harvey Satan. I might also add that Joe played the baddie in two episodes of **The Man from U.N.C.L.E.**

Scrabo: I would defer that question to the others here, as their research is superior. But I would like to bring up an interesting thing about **99 Loses CONTROL**. The pre-title sequence shows Max genuinely hurt by 99 getting "engaged." And although there are plenty of laugh lines, there is NO laugh track during that section. I would assume that was by Don Adams' insistence.

Sears: The first season episodes are the best in my opinion with the following seasons in order of production following that. Among the best for me are: **Rub a Dub Dub...Three Spies in a Sub, School Days, Our Man in Leotards, A Man Called Smart** (intended as a theatrical release but the poor reception of the feature film **Munster, Go Home** motivated the production to air it as the series' only three part episode. An interesting side note: **The Nude Bomb**, the 1980 **Get Smart** feature film, was intended as a TV reunion entry but was released theatrically), **99 Loses CONTROL, Snoopy Smart vs. the Red Baron**. My personal list of favorites goes on and on.

Coate: What are your thoughts on the DVD release of the series?

Birkmeyer: They did a fantastic job. Okay, I'm biased, as I helped put them together, but Time-Life really cared about doing it right. They wanted to make sure the right pictures were included and in the right season. They polled fans for the extras they wanted. I just wish the mess over rights had been settled before Don Adams died. Unfortunately, he died in the same month that they received the go-ahead.

Pfeiffer: I have the initial release of the series on DVD which Time-Life brilliantly marketed in packaging that was designed like a telephone booth. It was very pleasing to finally see the show released in such a first class manner. All aspects of the DVD set were excellent, especially the beautiful, remastered transfers.

Scrabo: The sets are a fan's dream. From the package design to the elaborate extras.

Sears: Immensely well produced! The content of extras and the packaging are wonderful! Some of the episodes are remastered from previous syndicated runs so for the discerning eye, there are the occasional two or three second screen shots that are missing. Unfortunately for me, my favorite episode, **Rub a Dub Dub... Three Spies in a Sub**, which features the brilliantly hilarious second appearance of Max and 99's arch enemy, Siegfried, has a sound issue right in the middle of the episode for a few minutes. It's not enough to detract, but a shame nonetheless.



Coate: Would you like to see the series get released on Blu-ray Disc?

Birkmeyer: No, no interest at all. There's no reason to do it.

Pfeiffer: The show cries out for a Blu-ray release. Hopefully, they can include even more extras, which I have an insatiable appetite for. It would be interesting to get some **Smart** experts to weigh in on the hits and misses found in the Carell movie. **Get Smart** remains laugh-out-loud funny. If a major network was clever, they would simply run it again in prime time. It would cost practically nothing and I would be willing to bet it would get decent ratings. It would certainly be a more inspired program than the junk they are currently spending a fortune on.

Scrabo: Yes. The colors are striking and we have real flesh tones! Barbara's outfits remain super cool, and Don Adams was voted the best dressed man on television at one point! The show was lit for comedy, and it's actually refreshing from today's post-production palette.

Sears: I doubt we will ever see that because I'm not sure the viewing public demands it, but

would you believe... yes, I would?!

Coate: Like it or not, **Get Smart** is a franchise. What are your thoughts on the follow-ups?

Birkmeyer: The less said, the better. Actually, I did enjoy **The Nude Bomb** a bit, but it wasn't that funny. **Get Smart, Again!** was very good but it used too many of the old bits instead of updating them. It was nice to see them all together again and it gave a great feeling of completion. The idea of Hymie now working as a crash test dummy was brilliant. **Get Smart 1995** on Fox was an abomination, as was the [2008] movie.

Pfeiffer: The 1980 big screen film **The Nude Bomb** was a missed opportunity done just to make a quick buck. There was no passion behind it. The writing was weak, the direction even weaker. The finale of the film became just another cheesy Universal film of that era that seemed to exist to showcase their theme park. There were a few inspired moments, but by and large, the movie was very lame. I haven't seen the 1989 TV movie **Get Smart, Again!** in many years but I do recall it being pretty good in that it brought back many elements of the original series and had Leonard Stern involved, which made all the difference. The 1995 attempt to revive the show was a terrible misfire. Who the hell wants to watch **Get Smart** with Andy Dick as the star and Adams and Feldon relegated to cameos? I guess I answered my own question: *no one* wanted to watch **Get Smart** with Andy Dick as the star and Adams and Feldon relegated to cameos. The Steve Carell feature film was by no means the worst big screen adaptation of a classic TV series. However, it seemed to prove that in some respects, you just can't go home again. The Carell film proved that some series should just be left to stand on their own legacies because trying to improve upon them generally proves to be a fruitless task. The more successful feature films based on series from that era generally dispensed with most of the original elements and reinvented the premises. The **Mission: Impossible** films and **The Man from U.N.C.L.E.**, for example, had virtually no relationship to the original show's concepts and ended up being entertaining in their own way. The less said about attempts to revive **The Wild Wild West** and **I Spy**, the better.

Scrabo: There are some clever things in **The Nude Bomb**, but, of course, it's diluted by the absence of 99 and Siegfried. The recent Steve Carell **Get Smart** film was odd, as it handled slapstick very badly. If it's not done correctly, it just comes off as regular painful violence. It's pretty uninspired when you have the Chief of CONROL saying lines like, "You want a piece of me?!"

Sears: I am the rare **Get Smart** fan who actually enjoys the follow ups. Though Ed Platt and Barbara Feldon are sorely missed and painfully unreferenced in **The Nude Bomb**, for me it is still the goofy, silly, and hilarious world of Maxwell Smart. Don Adams seems to really be



enjoying himself in the role. Without the pressure of a weekly production and the 10 year "hiatus" after the show's original run, perhaps he felt more able to relax and have fun. Though he stated that he never enjoyed the follow ups, he shines in his performance. It's the only entry of the whole series that truly full on spoofs specifically the James Bond films. **Get Smart, Again!** is a marvelous entry and has some wonderful nostalgic bits. To boot, Barbara Feldon returned to recreate the role that, like Don Adams as Max, only she could play. It's just a wonderful entry. As for the Fox TV series, it's not the strongest but still very much the world in which Agent 86 and his fellow familial and professional adventurers live. Having Don and Barbara in it is what saves it. Even Agent 13 and Siegfried return! And though I was fortunate enough to win a Warner Brothers video contest imitating Maxwell Smart and got to attend the premiere of the Steve Carrel version a few years ago, it really for me failed to recapture the "lightning in a bottle" that was and still is the canon of the original **Get Smart** series and follow ups.



Coate: What is the legacy of **Get Smart**?

Birkmeyer: I think it left a legacy of smart, funny TV. It also, corny as it sounds, impacted people's lives in a positive way. I've been running the **Get Smart** website for 20 years now and I've had thousands of messages from people telling me how much the show meant to them and how grateful they are to have seen it. Women that tell me they were inspired to become doctors, lawyers, and professionals because they saw Barbara's portrayal of a competent working woman in a man's field, someone who lost relatives in 9/11 and had their therapist prescribe **Get Smart** to show them to laugh again (it worked), or men that just used Max's pursuit of niceness as a role model. When Don Adams died, I received so much e-mail praising him and his impact on

people's lives that I had to take the day off work. One of my favorite stories is of someone who used to watch the show with his dad and loved how they bonded. So when his children were born, he watched the show with them and it became one of their family's "things." They love to toss out **Get Smart** lines to each other and laugh. What a great tribute—people loved the show, shared it, and became closer. Does it get better than that?

Pfeiffer: I guess the enduring legacy of the show is demonstrated by the fact that, [as this interview is being conducted], my colleagues and I are in preparations to present a 50th anniversary celebration of the show at New York's legendary Theatre 80 St. Marks with Barbara Feldon and Joe Sirola in attendance. The fact that we aren't preparing an anniversary celebration of **My Mother the Car** or **Captain Nice** is an indication of how many shows are deemed dispensable while a handful of others such as **Get Smart** resonate for generations to come.

Scrabo: In its day, **Get Smart** surpassed all expectations, and today I believe it can rest as one of the cleverest comedies ever on television.

Sears: Barbara Feldon said that perhaps the niche of **Get Smart** is that it is one of those shows that is incapable of being reproduced. I have to wholeheartedly agree. The combination of the entire cast, crew and production team created something so unique that, even today 50 years later, it transcends the time in which it was created. The catch phrases, the slapstick humor and the insightful satirical spoofing it presented us still holds up today. Would you believe it?



Coate: Thank you, Carl, Lee, Paul and Nate, for participating and sharing your thoughts on **Get Smart** on the occasion of its 50th anniversary.

- Michael Coate

