



The Great Television Boom of 1928

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'The Mod Squad's split personality

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Michael Cole,
Peggy Lipton,
Clarence Williams III
of 'The Mod Squad'

By Dick Hobson

1970-71 was loudly pitched as TV's season of "relevance," the year of mod casting and "getting it all together," the time sociology was finally to emerge from the documentary limbo into prime-time entertainment. Doctor shows aped *The Mod Squad*. Lawyer shows aped *The Mod Squad*. Even *The Mod Squad* seemed to go ape with episodes about campus killings, Supreme Court "hand-cuff-the-police" rulings and its own miniversion of the My Lai massacre.

Then the bottom fell out of relevance.

The "numbers" weren't there. Those "audience averages." That "demographic profile." *The Storefront Lawyers* frantically revamped its format, injecting geriatric "downers," and came up as *Men at Law*—emphasis on "Men." Late-night conferees argued about taking the "Young" out of *The Young Lawyers*. The newly "with-it" Andy Griffith slunk back to the irrelevant boon-docks from which he sprang. Relevance, in a word, went bust—except for *The Mod Squad* itself, the generally acknowledged model for the mod boom.

Mod Squad, in fact, was stronger than ever, pulling ratings like a 45 per-cent share of the audience, frequently among the Top 10, rarely out of the Top 20. "Why is *Mod Squad* the only relevant show to make

it?' I've never heard a question asked so much," says Aaron Spelling, the show's executive producer.

His answer: "We've never *thought* of being relevant. We've never used the *word* relevant. We've never said, 'Let's do a show about 8000 fish being killed in the oil slick'."

Of the show's two producers, alternating week to week, one is Tony Barrett, who really made his mark as a radio actor. His answer: "Relevance? I don't think the show would make it for

The Show with a Split Personality

'Mod Squad' has found the secret of being 'relevant' and 'irrelevant'



20 seconds just by picking topics that are big today." The other, Harve Bennett, the producer who lately bowed out of the series, protested, perhaps too loudly to be convincing, "I'd be the first to say *Mod Squad* is not anti-Establishment."

The show's stars—"one black, one white, one blonde"—don't talk much about anti-Establishment but on the subject of relevance are unanimous. Black Clarence Williams III: "It's nothing but escapist entertainment, man. *Mod Squad* is not trying to solve the problems of the country." White Michael Cole: "Our job is to entertain, not to write social documents." Blonde Peggy Lipton: "It's all cop stuff."

This expert testimony would seem to put to rest the question of *The Mod Squad's* imputed "relevance." The reasons for its success would evidently have to be sought in some other department. Then an unexpected clue turned up. Jean Ross, a TV GUIDE national-programming writer, whose job it is to read every *Mod Squad* script and summarize it in a sentence or two, happened to remark that *The Mod Squad* scripts read like two different shows, or—as she put it—"The Barrett Squad" and "The Bennett Squad."

A mountainous pile of scripts was hastily assembled—83 episodes have been produced to date—and assiduously perused. A literary detective story began to unfold. "The Barrett Squad," it soon became apparent, was a cops-and-robbers show about hoodlums, hot cars, cop killers, blackmail, bunco artists, kidnapers, narcotics peddlers, murderers, motorcycle gangs and syndicate mobsters. "The Bennett Squad" turned out to be a show about campus unrest, the U.S. Supreme Court's Miranda Decision, old-breed cops versus new-breed, slum lords and ghetto living conditions, the quality of American Indian life, a "survival house" for the re-

habilitation of drug addicts, cops gone wrong, a retarded child, a draft evader.

The literary evidence was incontrovertible. There are two *Mod Squads*: one irrelevant, the other relevant.

Confronted with this proposition, executive producer Spelling, a man who is highly attuned to the fact that the so-called relevant shows bombed out on Nielsen's audiometers this season, could only say: "We've never *thought* of being relevant, but if people have *accepted* us as being relevant, if they feel we're dealing with things that are happening today, we're overjoyed."

Co-producer Barrett, master of meat-and-potatoes melodrama, virtuoso of the *schtick*, the gimmick, or, as he calls it, the "wienie," a man who talks Broadwayese, many of whose characters are straight out of Damon Runyon, readily concedes that his shows are not at all relevant: "That's what *makes* us. If we went for relevance every week, we'd wind up with similarity and dullness."

Co-producer Bennett, termed by Spelling "our undercover house liberal," is forced to admit: "I'm glad it's finally out. Bringing a sense of contemporary social as well as human relevance to *The Mod Squad* has been my contribution, yes." On his office wall hang plaques of commendation from the Writers Guild of America for two *Mod Squad* scripts he wrote dealing with contemporary themes.

The "undercover" producer injected *The Mod Squad's* first breath of contemporaneity early in the first season. "It was the first script I'd ever written. I was alone in the room with my typewriter and I thought, 'For the first time I can say *something*. I don't have to be trapped in schlockmeisterville!' It was a story about a black hero, a Green Beret back from Vietnam, whose opinions about this society had to do with being a 'second-class citizen.' ABC wouldn't let me use that phrase. It →

was the first time the network recognized that we might want to say something about things that were happening in the country right now."

Spelling's response to *Mod Squad's* new relevance: "Aaron wavered between both camps." The cast's reaction: "I have never to this day received from any member of the cast the simple sentence, 'This is a good script.' None of these kids read the scripts. They just scan the pages for their own dialogue."

Later in the season, when Bennett wrote a script about a militant black priest, the network submitted it to a conservative Catholic Monsignor who promptly called it "Communist propaganda." Bennett had to take the script to liberal Jesuits to get it endorsed. The season wound up with "The Bennett Squad" tackling the ticklish subject of draft evasion. "I thought we were in trouble, but if you can do a show where a draft resister is the sympathetic character, you have done something worth doing."

The pattern was thus set, with the two *Mod Squads* alternating—one week cops-and-robbers, the next week social relevance. "The coexistence was a fact," concedes Bennett, "the coexistence of two different styles within the show. In the second year I simply got a little bolder. I reached out more. In the third year I got deeper in my bag and Tony continued in his. I began to get bored with the obligatory punch scene, the obligatory chase scene, the obligatory outdoor scene. I threw all those rules away. Admittedly, I could do heavier material this year because I knew we were safe in the ratings."

When "The Bennett Squad" waded into the touchy area of black and Chicano ghetto tenants victimized by slumlords, even high-brow critics started to take notice. "*Mod Squad* was constructively anti-Establishment," wrote Robert Lewis Shayon in the *Saturday Review*.

"*The Mod Squad* episode was notable for its criticism of secular institutions that maintain law and order, but that are unable to provide justice . . ."

The campus demonstration episode aired last January couldn't have been more self-consciously relevant. According to Bennett: "A year ago during the Valley State College trouble, I read a quotation from a Black Students Union leader about their takeover of campus buildings. He said it was because they wanted to determine their own curriculum. He was a music major, but he said there was no point in a black man learning about Bach. 'There is nothing relevant about Bach,' he said. When I read that, I went into a crazy spin about our cultural heritage and the continuity of life and so on, and that ended up with our show on *The Mod Squad*."

With the show's own My Lai massacre, aired last November, *The Mod Squad* attained its apogee of relevance. "To even try this on an action-adventure show," says Bennett, "was insane, insane! When I called Dorothy Brown of Program Standards and Practices I thought she'd simply say, 'You are out of your mind' or 'Go jump out the window.' I said, 'Dorothy, I would like to do this show for one reason only and this will be the theme of the show—that a country which is capable of admitting there's a possibility that we killed innocent civilians and is capable of putting it in print and talking about it cannot be a bad place in which to live.' She just gave me some ground rules, such as soft-peddaling the fact that children were killed, and we took it from there."

So it is necessary to rephrase the initial question to read: "Why is *The Mod Squad* the only schizophrenic show to make it?" Does it owe its success to the shows that are relevant or to the shows that are irrelevant? The ratings don't tell us; they remain the same from Bennett week to Barrett week. →

Spelling thinks it's the not-so-young kids who make the show: Cole, 31, the high school dropout from Madison, Wis.; Williams, 30, former cook and numbers writer from Harlem; and Lipton, 24, the corporation attorney's daughter from Long Island. "I think stars are the most important thing you have in any show," says Spelling. "If we ever have an argument as to who's right on a line, the producer or the actor, there's no contest as far as I'm concerned. It's the actor. I think these kids would have been successful in anything. I tried to do another *Mod Squad* with *The New People* two years ago, and it didn't work. Why? Because I didn't have Michael, Clarence or Peggy."

The secret of their appeal, Spelling feels, derives from their off-screen close relationship. "They actually love each other and it can't help but translate to the screen. They love Tige Andrews too. That father thing isn't just made up. When Michael had his auto accident, Clarence was on the phone from New York. 'Shall I fly back? Does he need me?' When they read that interview in *Life*, they didn't say, 'Ha, ha! Peggy's got her neck in a wringer!' They were upset by it, but Michael went around on the set and said, 'Cool it. Let's not have any *Life* jokes when Peggy's around.'"

(Miss Lipton had been quoted: ". . . now I have this bad fault of being late. Maybe it's sort of an indirect way of letting them know you just don't care as much, that you're just bringing in the bread. . . . After *Mod Squad* I don't want to do TV ever again.")

Mod Squad had gotten off to a shaky start. In May 1968, four months prior to its fall debut, a full-page ad in *The New York Times* announced: "The police don't understand the now generation and the now generation doesn't dig the fuzz. The solution: find some swinging young people who live the

beat scene. Get them to work for the cops." Recalls Spelling: "We were stuck with that stigma of the kids being undercover dragnets, kids finking on kids. We got letters before we went on the air saying, 'You dirty cop finks!'"

When Cole came to Spelling's office to read for the part of Pete and found out the part was an undercover cop, he exploded. "I don't want anything to do with it! I'm not going to take the part of a guy who finks on his friends!" After reading the script he calmed down. "I'm not going to apologize, but may I test for the part?" When the pilot was screened for prospective writers, five or six of the most respected writers in television got up and left. At the end of the screening one got up, made a long speech about "excrement" and stalked out.

The initial brouhaha about kids finking on kids made the producers hypersensitive on the subject. Subsequent scripts have been routinely furbished with lines like, "I do not fink on a soul brother." Youth crime, in fact, has been avoided. Most of the heavies have been adults with power.

Curiously, given his concern for the significant social statement, Harve Bennett feels that the popularity of *The Mod Squad* is due not to its relevance and not to the skillful casting of the leads but rather to its underlying theme. He says, "What we're really talking about is *loneliness*—three estranged young people who sort of huddled together and became, without knowing it, a family. They represent and speak for a similar estrangement and search for ties on the part of an awful lot of young people today."

But that was before a small front-page item appeared in *Variety*: 'MOD SQUAD' BOW-OUT BY HARVE BENNETT.

It could just as aptly have read: CURE FOR SCHIZOPHRENIA FOUND AT LAST. END