

Remembering Tom Bosley and Happy Days

By Jim Meskimen

With the recent passing of actor Tom Bosley, my mind has been flooded with memories from the times in my life that were dominated by the sitcom *Happy Days*.

The show quite literally changed my life and that of my family—my mom, actress Marion Ross, played her most defining TV role for the eleven years the show ran, and became with time, one of a very few icons of American small screen motherhood.

I guess one could say *Happy Days* was the *Friends* or *Seinfeld* of its day; frothy, playful, warm, familiar, unpretentious, with characters one knew and loved and looked forward to visiting every Tuesday night.

I was 12 or 13 when the first pilot aired on ABC, our channel 7 in Los Angeles. It was presented as “Love and the Happy Days”, the peculiar title referring to its forced inclusion as a chapter of the then popular sex comedy, *Love, American Style*, which always attached “Love and...” to each of its acts.

Tom Bosley was not in that pilot, but mom was, playing Marion Cunningham opposite Harold Gould, another fine TV actor who coincidentally passed earlier this year.

Ron Howard was in it, of course, and in a very circuitous, almost perpetual motion machine sort of way, was the reason the pilot was picked up and made into a series—quite apart from his substantial talents and early fame, Ron’s performance in that pilot which was shelved after that *Love, American Style* airing, inspired the young George Lucas to cast Ron as the lead in *American Graffiti*. When ’50’s era *Graffiti* became a hit, the then Paramount studios head Michael Eisner recalled the 50’s era pilot that was gathering dust in the Paramount vault and wisely hustled it onto the air, capitalizing on the white hot popularity of it’s lead actor in chinos and high tops.

Which hit created which first? *American Graffiti*? *Happy Days*? Answer: they both did. More accurately, Ron Howard did.

(This amazing bit of happenstance and salesmanship is detailed in Garry Marshall’s wonderful autobiography, *Wake Me When it’s Funny*, about his life as successful writer, producer, director and actor. I highly recommend it.)

I recall my very first visit to the *Happy Days* set at Paramount. The show was still shot single camera (as opposed to multi-camera, which it later evolved into) and was filmed like a movie, with long days and no live audience. I remember how dark the sound stage was, and how nervous I was about making any noise that might ruin a take.

I was aware of Tom Bosley at the time even though I was just a kid, because he was also the voice of “Father” on an animated series of the day, *Wait ‘Til Your Father Comes Home*. I was impressed that one actor could have two TV shows at the same time. Tom’s avuncular sarcastic delivery kept him working as

a valued voice actor for decades. I don't remember actually meeting Tom that first day, but I recall seeing his dressing room door and, with my friend Danny Sternfield, joking that perhaps an animated man would walk out.

I do recall meeting Ron Howard, who was very friendly and personable. He was probably 19 or 20, my daughter's age now. He had already been a "name" since he was a little guy of about six, and had been working since he was three, if legend is accurate.

I was aware of Ron's significant stature not only because of his role as Opie on *The Andy Griffith Show*, but also because coincidentally, my mom had never failed to point him out to me when he popped up on television, I think with the idea of inspiring me to become a professional like him, to be successful, that here was someone who WAS someone... make note!

So, I was very eager and impressed by meeting Ron, and our friendship has lasted to this day.

Happy Days didn't take off for a couple of seasons, and unlike today, the show was allowed time to find its audience and develop as a show.

When it went "Three Camera" (a misnomer, because there were never less than four cameras in service in a typical scene) *Happy Days* ascended into the stratosphere, and suddenly my mom was on a rocket ride, soon to become a fixture in the television firmament.

I vividly recall myself saying at the time that switching to a multi-camera format was going to "Kill the show". I was so certain of it. (I was very reactionary when I was a young teen.) I'm really glad I was wrong.

Happy Days was a complete sensation. It's hard now to describe the excitement audiences had at the time for the show, and especially for Fonzie— the magnitude of the shrieks when Henry Winkler was introduced at the top of each show's filming were up on the Elvis meter. Women and girls got absolutely giddy. But then, it's also hard to imagine television with only five channels.

All the young leads, Ron, Don (then Donny) Most, Anson Williams (who was also a teen heart-throb at the time as a soft pop crooner) and Henry Winkler were huge stars that would spontaneously attract enormous crowds of fans whenever they appeared together in public. It was something to see.

Show creator Garry Marshall had, early in the run of the show, a brilliant plan to keep his actors out of trouble. He put together a softball team with the entire cast, plus some athletically gifted extras, writers and friends, and toured them around the country during the show's hiatus periods, which were usually in the summer months.

Since this was the late seventies, with cocaine and other drug use rampant, and his youthful cast were earning fortunes, this bright idea that had many positive ramifications. The publicity for the show was tremendous, the boys became even better ball players, nobody OD'd or died from drug use, and my mom learned how to field and bat.

The camaraderie that was built on the softball fields and baseball stadiums during those tours infected the whole spirit of the show during the “Work” season, and helped to create the remarkable chemistry of the show.

Even Tom Bosley played softball. I can’t recall what position he played, but I do recall his casual, indulgent lope out onto the field, or his “Aren’t I a good sport?” jog off the field at the end of an inning, where he would light up one of innumerable skinny brown More cigarettes once he got into the dugout.

What a dream come true for an actor, I remember thinking at the time, to be on a hit show half the year, playing softball with your friends the other half... how the hell do you manage that?

Was I jealous? Not really. Actually, I felt as close to all that fame as I wanted to. I hadn’t made up my mind to be an actor then, was still toying with the idea of becoming a political cartoonist, so to be included in the hullabaloo was enjoyment enough; I didn’t feel I was missing out on anything. There was more than enough fun to be had, I felt wealthy with all the famous people around me who knew me well enough to say “Hiya, Jim!”

(Years later, I was fortunate enough to appear on *Happy Days*, in the famous episode that eventually resulted in the term “Jumping the shark”, as a young beach dude that announces the existence of that same shark. But that is a tale for another Blog.)

One time I do specifically recall Tom Bosley being kind to me was when he happened to be over at our house, probably for a party, and I showed him what I had been drawing. I loved to show anybody what I had been drawing; it was my only way to get any attention at all from adults, and what I was rendering at the time was a picture of the actor Art Carney, who was up for an Academy Award for a film called “Harry & Tonto”. Tom looked at the drawing and then said, “How would you like me to get this drawing to Art Carney himself? He’s a friend of mine.”

Of course, at the time, the last thing I wanted was to give this drawing away to anybody, including Art Carney, but that was still a very nice gesture on Tom’s part. I think I kept the little sketch and entered in a school art show, which was where it belonged, but I always remembered his kind invitation.

With Tom’s passing, a chapter has ended in the *Happy Days* story. I don’t imagine any more reunion shows will be in our future... but then again, I was wrong about the show going multi-camera, I could be 100% wrong about this too, and that would be okay.

The End