The most dangerous men on TV

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During its three year run on CBS from 1967-69, The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour was the most controversial program on television. Tom and Dick Smothers used their primetime pulpit to protest the war in Vietnam, racial injustice and censorship. They launched Pat Paulsen's quixotic, satiric run for the presidency. They shattered the 17-year TV blacklist against Pete Seeger, insisting that he perform "Waist Deep In The Big Muddy," a song inspired by a new photo of American soldiers slogging through a river in the Mekong Delta. And they were canceled for running a "sacrilegious" sermonette on Jonah and the whale by comedian David Steinberg.

In "Dangerously Funny," TV critic David Bianculli celebrates the show "as the bravest, boldest entertainment series of its age." Drawing on the original and air check recordings, internal CBS memos and interviews with virtually all the principals, he tells the fascinating story of a struggle to push the boundaries of network television — and of two brothers, who, with the help of couple's therapy, have stayed together longer than any act in show business, except for Smith and Dale.

Although it was pitted against "Bonanza," "The Comedy Hour," Bianculli points out, managed to bridge a generation gap that in the '60s was becoming "A Grand Canyon-like chasm." Tom and Dick showcased rock groups, including Buffalo Springfield, Jefferson Airplane, and the Who; helped launch the careers of Steve Martin and Rob Reiner; featured Leigh French, whose "Share A Little Tea With Goldie" spots were laced with references to drugs; and made room for veterans Jimmy Durante, Kate Smith and Mel Torme.

By today's standards, Bianculli demonstrates, the "Comedy Hour" seems pretty harmless. But "back then," it pushed the envelope. The brothers used good-byes as a platform to express their views. Tom ended one show by reading a Mother's Day card — "I don't want candy or flowers. I want an end to killing." CBS killed the salutation before it reached the airwaves. So, Tom ended a show in September 1967 by saluting the young men who went to Canada to avoid the draft: "Take it easy, fellas. We hope to have you home, if not by this November, maybe next."

Bianculli reveals that he tried, without success, to find a smoking gun to connect President Nixon to the demise of the program. Nonetheless, a lack of evidence doesn't deter him. "Either Nixon covered his tracks well," he guesses, or CBS brass acted out of fear that the Nixon administration might not renew the licenses of network affiliates if they didn't smother the brothers.

And, of course, they did. Tom and Dick sued. In 1973, they were awarded $776,300 for breach of contract, $140,000 for copyright infringement, and $1 for punitive damages. In a sense, Bianculli concludes, it wasn't enough. "By risking, losing, and never again regaining the massive and influential popularity they had as outspoken young TV stars, the Smothers Brothers may have suffered and sacrificed the most."

Even more importantly, network television lost its nerve. Forty years after the "Comedy Hour" was canceled, you can count on the fingers of one hand "the attempts by push-the-boundaries, tackle-the-tough-topic shows on broadcast TV."

Dangerously Funny  The Uncensored Story
of the Smothers
Brothers Comedy Hour
David Bianculli
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Associate Images:
"The Smothers Brothers Show" starred comedians Tommy (left) and Dick Smothers. Associated Press file.