

## Radio and Television

# The Smothers Make It Big



By Lawrence Laurent

THE HIT of the "second season" is "The Smothers Brothers" comedy-variety hour (CBS, Channel 9). Over the last three audience measurement reports from the A. C. Nielsen Co. the program has succeeded in doing what had been considered impossible.

It knocked "Bonanza" out of first place. In the most recent report, "Bonanza" was down to 15th place and the Brothers Smothers was in 23d place. The question now becomes "Why?"

NBC, home of "Bonanza," is in a state of shock. CBS, base for the Smothers, is in a state of astonishment.

And while one group weeps and the other rejoices, students of television have one more indication that the number of things we don't comprehend about TV far outnumber the things we think we know. Ignorance—which is rampant in the electronic medium—is never admitted, nor tolerated.

Six weeks ago, the laughter was derisive when "The Smothers Brothers" had its premiere. After all, the team had come out of San Francisco as a folk singing novelty act. It had played night clubs and made the rounds of the TV variety shows. A small cult of worshippers had been created but the act was generally considered to be one of limited appeal.

**HOW LIMITED** the appeal became plain when the Brothers made a situation comedy. Tom Smothers, the one who plays dumb and pained, was cast as an apprentice angel sent to earth to perform good deeds.

Those ratings that now cause so much delight were only a source of sorrow. They were low and the series had only a short run.

The team came back to TV for what was expected to be an even shorter run in the disaster area left by "The Garry Moore Show."

One explanation, shimmering in simplicity, is that the Sunday night audience likes to see three variety shows. This audience starts with Ed Sullivan, continues with The Smothers Brothers and switches to NBC for "The Andy Williams Show." As I was informed by one expert, "You can watch all Sunday evening and never be troubled by a single thought."

The explanation is clever but Garry Moore had a variety hour, too. And it was certainly no worse than the one with the Brothers.

Last Sunday's program had Carol Burnett. She was making her first TV appearance since the birth of her second daughter. Carol sang, grimaced and hit Tom Smothers with several karate chops.

Also present was the Baja Marimba Band. This is something like the Tijuana Brass, except it has more musicians. The big yak of the evening was to have this Latin group play Irish music, a salute to St. Patrick's Day.

Dick Smothers sang in a pleasant, reedy voice and joined Tom in a four-year-old routine called "Mother Always Liked You Best."

**AS VARIETY SHOWS** go these days, it had none of the taut professionalism that marks a Danny Kaye or Dean Martin show. It had nothing close to the broad, disciplined comedy of a Red Skelton hour. More than anything, it resembled an amateur hour that was produced on a big budget.

The best answer, then, is that ratings (at best) offer a scale of popularity for competing programs. And it may be that "Bonanza"—for many—worn thin its formula of middle aged men who are still trying to overcome the harrowing problems of their youth.

Or, as a jubilant employe at a CBS affiliated station said: "Man, we don't even try to explain. We just enjoy."