

Interview: Norman Lear of ‘Norman Lear: Just Another Version of You’

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CHICAGO – Norman Lear is one of the greatest TV creators of the 20th Century, and beyond. The producer was a titan of 1970s television, with shows like “All in the Family,” “Good Times,” “Maude” and “Sanford and Son.” He is the topic of a new film documentary, “Norman Lear: Just Another Version of You.”

Lear is the embodiment of television history, having worked in the medium since its advent in the 1950s. He began with partner Ed Simmons, writing for shows like the “Ford Star Revue” and “The Colgate Comedy Hour” (with Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis). Throughout the 1950s and ‘60s, he produced television that was common at the time – star oriented and non-controversial – while also writing and producing movie satire like “Divorce, American Style” and “Cold Turkey,” with partner Bud Yorkin. In the late 1960s, he began to work on a pilot called “Justice for All,” featuring a bigoted character named “Archie Justice.” After three attempts to sell the concept, Lear (and Yorkin) retooled the show and renamed it “All in the Family.” It was picked up by CBS-TV in January of 1971.



Just Another Version of You: Producer Norman Lear is the Subject of a New Documentary

Photo credit: Music Box Films

This began a renaissance for television, as the “liberal versus conservative” dynamic of the show played out weekly on America’s television screens. Lear then expanded his stable of 1970s TV hits, with “Sanford and Son,” “Maude,” “The Jeffersons” and “One Day at a Time,” among others. Each show was characterized by a new realism, where characters discussed social issues, politics and current events, a sharp

departure from 1950s and '60s sitcoms.

Norman Lear is still alive and still producing at 93 years old, working on a digital sitcom about retirees. He has been honored with virtually every award that television offers, as well as being a charter inductee (1984) in the Television Academy Hall of Fame, and received the National Medal of Arts from President Bill Clinton in 1999. Lear is an outspoken progressive liberal, and founded the advocacy group "The People for the American Way" in 1981.

HollywoodChicago.com got the honor of talking briefly to Norman Lear in October of 2015, where he made an appearance at The Art Institute of Chicago as part of the Institute's "Lectures and Performances" series. His autobiography is "Even This I Get to Experience," and the new film documentary on his life, "Norman Lear: Just Another Version of You" opens Friday, August 5th, 2016, at Chicago's Music Box Theatre.

HollywoodChicago.com: What was the first television show you worked on, and what do you believe has remained unchanged in the business since your first jobs?

Norman Lear: I started by writing, with my partner Ed Simmons, a monologue for Danny Thomas, that he performed at Ciro's nightclub in Los Angeles. Then I got a call from an agent to come to New York City, and write for the 'Ford Star Revue.' Because at the time there wasn't much 'national television,'

Ed and I became stars in the emerging medium of television. We were new and fresh, just like TV at the time, so we automatically became 'THE' comedy writers for television. Then next up was [Dean] Martin and [Jerry] Lewis on 'The Colgate Comedy Hour.'

HollywoodChicago.com: Since their comedy style was so distinct, how did you adjust your writing style?

Lear: We all started together, so there were no rules – anything we wrote became television. As a matter of fact, when people ask where my 'point of view' comes from, it was there in one of the first sketches we wrote for Martin and Lewis. The movies had a slogan at the time, to distinguish themselves from TV, that said 'movies are better than ever.' We mocked that concept by doing a sketch that was about a theater trying to get one customer to come in...and that customer was Jerry Lewis. It generated so much controversy that Dean and Jerry had to apologize in a full page ad in Variety.

HollywoodChicago.com: You've said several times that the character of Archie Bunker was in part derived from your father. What part of him was most like that famous character?

Lear: He used to call me 'the laziest white kid he'd ever met.' When I countered that he didn't have to put down a race of people to say that, he replied, 'and you're the dumbest white kid I've ever met.' [laughs] He wasn't a bigot like Archie, but that was the part of him that was most like Archie.



King Lear: 'All in the Family' Portrait in 'Norman Lear: Just Another Version of You.'

Photo credit: Music Box Films

HollywoodChicago.com: You were a combat participant in World War II. Since that war was fought to truly defeat fascism, why in your opinion since then has the United States has insisted on keeping up a string of enemies, and the wars associated with creating those enemies?

Lear: In one question you are expressing a world of opinion. Because it is you who thinks that America has been mistakenly starting these

conflicts. I happen to agree with you, [laughs] and I will repeat what your question suggested...we have mistakenly gotten into one fracas after another. Why we do that, I think it's because we're afraid to look in the mirror and understand who we are. I think America, unfortunately, collectively thinks of itself as the 'chosen people.' To my knowledge, there are no chosen people, we are all human beings.

HollywoodChicago.com: When 'All in the Family' took off as a cultural phenomenon, what do believe was in the timing that made it that way?

Lear: It took ten weeks to take off in 1971, and we were lucky to start in January, because if it had started in the regular fall season of 1970, I don't know if we would have lasted. The ratings didn't take off until the end of that fall season, when the other two networks ran out of fresh shows. When they went into reruns, we still had episodes that were first run.

Culturally, I think 'All in the Family' was universal enough to have good timing at any time. As H.L. Mencken once said, 'nobody ever when broke underestimating the intelligence of the American people.' Our show countered that witticism. I think he was wrong.

HollywoodChicago.com: You set the sitcom 'Good Times' in Chicago, and within a notorious housing project, Cabrini Green. What were you saying about the African American middle class experience with that setting?

Lear: We wanted to depict their struggle there, and we wanted to do a different city setting. We had two African American writers [Eric Monte and Michael Evans] on the show that knew Cabrini Green inside and out, and that's why we set it there.

HollywoodChicago.com: You recently lost your partner of many years, Bud Yorkin. What story that you can remember about him best defines your relationship or the man himself?

Lear: There are a millions stories. Bud was the kindest and dearest man, and one of the most talented directors there was. I guess the story that best defines us and our relationship goes back to the Martin and Lewis show. The four stage managers on that show became major TV creators and directors – John Rich, Jack Smight, Arthur Penn and Bud Yorkin.

Bud broke out big when he did 'The Fred Astaire Show' and won four Emmys. His wife at the time suggested that we team up. We got a lot of press in show business papers, and a number of offers...we eventually signed with Paramount Pictures. But I always like to say, his was the horse that we rode in on. That is my favorite recollection.

HollywoodChicago.com: You've fought for many years against religion infiltrating government. Why do you think people of faith are so sensitive when people like you point out that it shouldn't be part of government? Why aren't they just content with faith?



Norman Lear with Dean Martin & Jerry Lewis

Photo credit: NBC-TV

Lear: Power is the goal of religion in general. What happens at the average church or synagogue or mosque is that I don't know many priests or ministers or rabbis who say to their congregation, 'go home and talk about the religion at the kitchen table with your kids...talk about God, talk about what this is all about.' They say in general, come back on the weekend, we'll talk to you about it. I think that of most leaders in religion as power brokers. They give orders, in a sense, to an audience every week, and that's where the definition of God starts.

HollywoodChicago.com: In your long career and history, which person did your really want to meet, and what impression did they make upon you once you did meet them?

Lear: Well, I never met who I really wanted to meet, and that was Charlie Chaplin. But I wanted to work with Bert Lahr [the 'Cowardly Lion' in 'The Wizard of Oz'], and I did. I wanted to meet Bob Hope, and I got to know him pretty well.

HollywoodChicago.com: You've seen so many changes in society in your long and lucky life, and so much progress have been made in civil, women and gay rights in the United States. What goals do you want for the next generation, and how do think we achieve those goals?

Lear: I wish I knew how we achieve the goal of world peace. My bumper sticker reads 'Just Another Version of You.' The sooner we agree that we're just other versions of each other – we human beings – the sooner we will find some sense of world peace.

"Norman Lear: Just Another Version of You" continues its limited release in Chicago on August 5th at the Music Box Theatre, 3733 North

Southport, Chicago. For other screenings, see local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring Norman Lear, George Clooney, Rob Reiner and Bea Arthur. Directed by Rachel Grady and Heidi Ewing. Not Rated. Norman Lear’s autobiography, “Even This I Get to Experience,” is available wherever books are sold. For more information on The Art Institute of Chicago Lectures and Performances, [click here](#). [21]



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