

WILL THE REAL 1968 PLEASE STAND UP?



THE TV GUIDE ADVERTISEMENT promised a great deal: "Kennedy. King. Chicago. Mini-skirts. Tet. *Laugh-In*. LBJ." 1968: *A Crack In Time*, shown June 11 on ABC, was to be different from the typical television documentary. "Tonight we're going to step back into that crack in time," Cliff Robertson begins the program, "and walk through a series of real events—moments more exciting and sometimes more horrifying than any playwright would dare to include in a work of fiction."

Co-hosts Robertson and Frank Reynolds promise that their walk through the past will tell us something important about ourselves. That year's events, they say, "cascaded upon one another in a sound and fury that signified more than we know even now, ten years later."

One hour later, the program had offered much sound and fury but little of significance about 1968. In fact, 1978: *A Crack In Time* is a barrage of film clips and commentary that could not have been better designed to strip events of their meaning.

Taking potshots at TV documentary specials is easy, and watching them—let alone examining them closely—can be a waste of time. But even a program as bad as 1968 reveals much about the way television organizes our immediate past—and its own.

In the beginning, *Laugh-In*.

The 1960s saw the sit-in and the teach-in and the be-in—political and cultural activities carried on outside the mainstream. Television's look at one year of massive protest begins with its own contribution to the forms of collective experience: *Laugh-In*.

"At its peak, upwards of 20 million Americans shared the *Laugh-In* experience in front of their television sets every Monday night," Robertson says. "It seemed like a good place to begin our walk through 1968."

One of the year's biggest stars has been introduced: television itself. 1968 presents ABC's Don Baker in Vietnam, ABC's Howard K. Smith on the Kennedy assassination, and CBS's Dan Rather at the Chicago Democratic convention. In each case, something unexpected happens. Baker can't remember where he is as he signs off, Smith worriedly extends California primary coverage as he learns of the shooting, and Rather is roughed up by security guards at the convention, provoking Walter Cronkite to burst out: "I think we've got a bunch of thugs here, Dan, if I may be permitted to say so." Cronkite is angry: something must be wrong.

From *Laugh-In*'s "Sock It To Me," Robertson is forced by the program's form—it is organized chronologically—into an awkward transition. "In 1968, it seemed like everyone wanted to sock it to someone else," he says, leading up to the seizure of the U.S.S. *Pueblo*. "On January

23, the day after *Laugh-In* first went on the air, North Korea socked it to the United States."

The walk through 1968 quickly becomes a forced march. The *Pueblo* incident and Tet give way to the New Hampshire primary, President Johnson's withdrawal and the King assassination. The Columbia protest, May 1968 in France, Kennedy's death and miniskirts follow in rapid succession.

Disconnected.

The chronology presents problems. Events that could easily be connected—the presidential primaries, the national political conventions and the election—are interrupted for snippets of foreign news, sports and culture.

1968 could have been organized thematically around such continuing stories as the election, the war, the campuses and the assassinations. Instead, the four segments are winter, spring, summer and fall. As the pages of the calendar flip past, we feel we've been thrown back into the year. What's next, we wonder, and if the war bores us we know that baseball and football and Jackie are soon to come.

Providing a sense of immediacy rather than the perspective of a decade, the program suggests innumerable evening newscasts packed into an hour. Robertson describes 1968 as a "miracle of historical compression," and the same might be said of the show itself.

The confrontations blur into one another. There are the identical helicopter shots of smoky buildings and people running. Washington is burning after King's murder, Saigon burns during Tet. Paris burns in May, and the machine guns on the White House steps could have been in Danang or Chicago.

"1968 was taking on a new distinction," Reynolds sums up. "It became the year of the demonstration, the year of the riot."

The demonstrations and riots are reduced to televised images of confrontation, torn out of context—Columbia was simply about "campus reform" and blacks rioted in the cities for no apparent reasons.

Here, for example, is the way ABC shifts from Chicago

Continued on page 18.