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Revell, Inc., 4201 Glencoe Ave., Venice, Calif. 90291.

## LIFE TV REVIEW

### Funny, funky and, ah, Flip

FLIP WILSON, ETC.

How to sneak up on Flip Wilson? Flip Wilson isn't serious. Flip Wilson injures the critic in the critic's Higher Seriousness. To be highly serious all the time is difficult, of course, even for Richard Nixon, Mark Lane and Sidney Hook. For a television critic it is impossible. The TV critic knows that TV is mostly a vacation for the brain, a kind of electronic laxative. His is a constant struggle to convert entertainment into rhetoric.

("What is the content of right reason?" asks Donald Barthelme in *City Life*. "The content of right reason is rhetoric." "And the content of rhetoric?" "The content of rhetoric is purity." "Is purity quantifiable?" "Purity is not quantifiable. It is inflatable." "How is our rhetoric preserved against attacks by other rhetorics?" "Our rhetoric is preserved by our elected representatives. In the fat of their heads." Now we are sneaking up on the point. The TV critic is a self-elected representative, a highly serious fathead.)

Take Flip Wilson and the racial crisis. Why has Flip Wilson succeeded where Leslie Uggams failed—in floating a prime-time variety hour organized around a black personality? Miss Uggams did her best to make a black personality just a deeper shade

personator are all clichés. (There hasn't been a female impersonator on prime-time TV since Milton Berle, and Wilson's Geraldine routines are 14 times funnier than anything Berle ever did.) What's more, they are ghetto clichés. Week after week, Wilson breezes into the attic of the white American mind, where all



Innocent hustler Wilson

those fantasies about sex and rhythm sit around collecting guilt, and he plays there. The fantasies are his props. He doesn't attack one rhetoric with another; he simply inflates himself, and by the time we've gotten used to him we find he's made room for lots of other things in our vacation world.

Being highly serious, the TV critic must wonder whether Wilson represents a regression. Children like him; therefore he can't be dangerous. There is no confrontation. There is no assault on the audience. There are no victims. Accustomed as we are to a politics of sadomasochism, to Leslie Fiedlering while Detroit burns, is there space in our seriousness for a nice guy, the product of foster home and joblessness, doing his innocent hustle? Selling ghetto yardgoods for a million yucks?

What Flip Wilson has accomplished is almost incredible in a time of Black Panthers and savage rhetoric. He has taken the *threat* out of the fact of blackness. He doesn't frighten anybody. He wouldn't hurt you, any more than Glen Campbell or Carol Burnett or Ed Sullivan would hurt you. Or Captain Kangaroo. Preserved in the fat of my head is the feeling that I don't deserve Flip Wilson's harmlessness. I like him, but apocalypse is the sandbox in which critics make mudpies, and maybe liking him is part of the problem instead of part of the solution. He wouldn't hurt me, but maybe, just maybe, he should.

by John Leonard



The flip side of Flip

of pale. Unlike Miss Uggams, Di-ahann Carroll, Lloyd Haynes and even, heaven help us, Bill Cosby, Flip Wilson has not permitted his blackness to be sanitized for home consumption. Most black people on TV are still occupied serving white people. Instead of maids and chauffeurs, they are nurses and teachers and pushers of Ironside's wheelchair. Implicit in this service is a bargain: If I help you, will you forgive me for the crimes you have committed against me? It's a form of social work.

But Flip Wilson is, ah, funky. He is comic energy to which a cluster of clichés attach themselves. The hip-swinging, eye-popping, mouth-jiving, high-living storefront minister, the sexual predator, the female im-

