

Zach Bucholtz
SAC 302
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"The Late Show": The Standard-Setter of Modern Late Night Comedy

The night of December 2, 2012, David Letterman was recognized at the Kennedy Center Honors gala. Among other recent Kennedy Center honorees are Oprah Winfrey, Paul McCartney, and The Who. Letterman, as he does every weeknight on his show, *The Late Show with David Letterman*, will just laugh a few times and wonder why everyone else is laughing with him. But what Dave doesn't realize (or at least doesn't admit publicly) is that he is the master of his craft. *The Late Show* sets the standard for the "man-at-a-desk"-style of late night talks shows. Positioning itself as an irreverent, mainstream hour of topical comedy, the show utilizes a sharp, sophisticated aesthetic and Letterman's own self-deprecating humor and witty, relevant interview style to continue to influence and shape the entirety of the late night landscape.

To fully understand *The Late Show* one must be familiar with its infamous beginnings. Letterman was a stand-up comedian who appeared regularly on *The Tonight Show* with Johnny Carson, eventually working his way into a regular guest-hosting role on the show. Letterman was then given his own show, *Late Night*, which ran for 12 years in the 12:30 a.m. timeslot (immediately after *Tonight*). When Carson announced his retirement in 1992, he expressed his desire to have Letterman take over for him. But when NBC chose Jay Leno for the 11:30 show, Letterman moved to CBS where, in September 1993, he did his first *Late Show* broadcast and has been ever since.

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Much of CBS' promotion for the new show was centered around the renovation of the Ed Sullivan Theatre on Broadway in Manhattan, the same place where The Beatles made their US debut and where Elvis Presley's hips caused a stir many years prior. Not only was this a new show, at a new time, competing directly with Leno, but it was to have a new look, too. The theatre, today, still stands above the rest. The faux-New York skyline in the back, while obviously fake, grabs the viewer's attention. If it's true that the bright lights of the city make one feel inspired and new, then the set of *The Late Show* succeeds in doing so. Then there is the marble-looking floor, shiny and clean. On Dave's desk sits a 1940s-style microphone, a prop, but a clear nod to a so-called "classier" era. The entire set is an ode to variety shows of the 50s and 60s, though more reflective of modern style.

When discussing the sophisticated style of the show, one looks no further than the man for whom the show is named. While it seems somewhat hard to believe for a guy whose career began as a stand-up comedian and a prankster (he was known to interrupt broadcasts of other shows while at NBC by walking onto the set), David Letterman is the perfect host for this show. He comes out each night in an expensive-looking suit, stands in the middle of the stage and graciously accepts the audience's applause before going into his monologue. He doesn't caress the camera the way Craig Ferguson does, nor does he leap and fist pump as Cona O'Brien does at the start of his show or angrily point to the camera like Stephen Colbert. Letterman's grace, poise, and dressy exterior – all brought on by his old

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age, no doubt – serve the show's purpose of aiming to keep the legion of fans who followed him to CBS in 1993 (and thus, the show's audience is decidedly much older than many of his competitors).

Even the show's graphics play into this theme of sophistication. The show opens to an aerial shot of New York, then cuts to a tracking shot of Broadway, a shot of the band dressed up and hanging out on a stoop, then a sweeping shot of the audience before cutting to Letterman's entrance on the stage. The intro to the Top Ten List – the show's signature segment – is often accompanied by an animated tour of the city. And the logo has remained virtually unchanged since the show's inception nearly two decades ago.

What this sophisticated visual style does is it allows the viewer to feel at home while watching the show, which is inevitably the point of any late-night show, going back to the genre's roots in the variety shows of old. The fact that the show does this explains, also, how and why it was struggled with younger demographics but done well with the older crowd.

Along with this sophisticated visual style is an irreverent style of comedy, poking fun at serious daily events and newsworthy people. While it seems counterintuitive that "sophisticated" and "irreverent" be used to describe the same program, *The Late Show* is masterful of being just that. David Letterman is such a master of knowing just exactly where to stop a joke, or when to run it to the ground for comedic effect. He makes fun of things without ever crossing any lines, and

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without resorting to anything cheap or dirty. He doesn't need a character to play, as Stephen Colbert does. Often his jokes flirt with the obscure in life (how many times has he made fun of the weather, for instance?). And he also makes fun of himself, which allows him to be vulnerable in a way most TV personalities shy from.

What truly separates Letterman as a host, though, is his ability to switch back and forth between serious and funny on the drop of a dime, or to seamlessly blend the two together. It was Letterman who was the first late night host to speak after September 11, 2001; his statements on the terrorist attacks on his show just six days later are legendary ("they were zealots fueled with religious fervor...and if you live to be a thousand years old will you know what that mean?"). He was the first to cross picket lines during the 2008 WGA strike. He spoke candidly about his personal sex scandal. And, normally a private man, Letterman even interviewed his heart surgeon on-air after his life-saving quadruple-bypass surgery.

For the entirety of his three decades on late night television, Letterman has been joined on stage by Paul Schaffer and his band. Schaffer, the original musical director for *Saturday Night Live* and *The Blues Brothers* brings another layer of both class and subtle humor to the show. Paul will often chime in an occasional brief response to one of Dave's joke, or serve as a sounding board for Dave to vent to from his desk. But his biggest contribution is serving as leader of the CBS Orchestra, which plays the theme song to open and close each show (a song Schaffer wrote himself) as well as playing during commercial breaks and when introducing guests

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or new segments. The band can be funny, as they are when playing “Stump the Band” or in making up a short song about a comedic bit. The ingenuity of Schaffer is picking out songs often goes unnoticed, too; every guest walks on stage to a song, usually having something to do with the movie they’re promoting, their new book, or whatever it is they are noteworthy for. This is so smart, so thoughtful, and yet can be very funny when the song itself can be the punchline of a joke. The band is, like other aforementioned elements of the show, a throwback to the old variety show days. But more than that, it’s a tribute to Letterman’s idol, Johnny Carson; the band’s name, the CBS Orchestra, is a reference to the NBC Orchestra that the *Tonight Show* band was sometimes referred to as.

As far as the technical side of the show is concerned, nothing is out of the ordinary. The show is built around the host, David Letterman. Aside from the occasional audience shot or insert, it uses a four-camera setup typical of most live-to-tape programs. One camera is on Paul, another a two-shot of Dave and the guest, then two crossing individual shots of Dave and the guest. The one noteworthy exception to the rule is that the cross-shot on Dave is actually from over the shoulder of the guest; it hasn’t always been that way but has become that as Dave has aged and high-definition TV has become the norm.

What this combination of classic, sophisticated visual style and irreverent, but witty and relevant humor does is set a standard for others to follow. Almost every other late night show borrows from Letterman; the only possible exception

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being the current *Tonight Show* which, like *The Late Show*, is based off of Johnny Carson's program. However, there are those who will argue that Jay Leno copies from David Letterman all the time. Craig Ferguson, for example, hosts the *Late Late Show*, which Letterman's company produces. *Conan* and *Colbert Report* both came after *The Late Show* and copy many of the visual and creative aspects of the show. It can be said that *The Late Show* is the center of the late-night universe, and what better proof than the sight of a gracious David Letterman sitting next to Barack Obama as the first and only late-night host to receive Kennedy Center Honors?