

Boomers are spending their 'Nites' with Nick



Steve Hall

Early in O.J. Simpson's double murder trial, a key prosecution witness timed his whereabouts by remembering the Nick at Nite lineup.

It's just another indication of how firmly the cable network of "classic TV" has entrenched itself in baby boomers' psyches as it celebrates its 10th anniversary. Nick at Nite has achieved the improbable, making reruns cool again and giving families a safe TV haven.

Given Nick at Nite's popularity — third among all cable networks in prime time, averaging 800,000 homes nightly — a TV channel structured like an oldies radio station, playing the greatest hits of past decades, seems like a no-brainer in retrospect.

But Nick at Nite general manager Rich Cronin, a Notre Dame graduate, says that executives of children's network Nickelodeon debated hard when given the chance to expand their channel to 24 hours on July 1, 1985.

Some thought the kids' programming should continue at night — when children are asleep — so parents could see what their youngsters liked.

Cooler heads prevailed, and Nick at Nite was born, with its mixture of nostalgic programs like *My Three Sons* and hip, offbeat promotions such as a "Donna-thon," in which women dressed as Donna Reed ran through and "tidied" Chicago, and "The Back of Patty Duke's Head" (focusing on the actress who played Duke's double in the twins sitcom *The Patty Duke Show*).

Come on, get happy

Cronin's favorite was 1993's eight-city "Partridge Family: Back on the Bus Tour," featuring David Cassidy. "We got huge crowds of two generations — thirtysomething moms who had grown up with the show and had David Cassidy posters on their bedroom walls, and their kids," he said.

My 8-year-old often chooses Nick at Nite over network sitcoms aimed at her — which Cronin, 40, has observed with his daughters, ages 9 and 6.

"Partly, they're staying with the channel because they consider Nickelodeon their channel," he says. "But it's also really hard for anything today to match an *I Love Lucy* or *Bewitched*. And all these shows are brand new to them."

Not all reruns fare equally well on Nick at Nite. Shows that were huge hits when they first aired — like *The Dick Van Dyke Show* and *Taxi* — become hits for Nick at Nite. Cult favorites such as *Fernwood 2-Night*, *SCTV* and *The White Shadow* rarely gain a larger audience on the channel.

Cronin believes Nick at Nite inspired the current craze of turning vintage shows into movies.

"We really helped build the whole television nostalgia phase," he says. "Go into any comedy club and you'll hear references to *Gilligan's Island* and *The Brady Bunch*. We established that these shows are an important part of our culture."

More than just good TV

Nick at Nite celebrates its anniversary next week with one episode of every series it's aired. On July 3, "Vertivision" — each night featuring episodes from one series — returns with the likes of *Munsters Mondays* and *Welcome Back Kotter Fridays*.

But Nick at Nite is more than just television. With Sony, the channel has launched a record label, with the first release, *Donna Reed's Dinner Party*, featuring such tunes as *Que Sera Sera* and the recipe for Donna's dark chocolate cake in the liner notes.

A Nick at Nite magazine, an on-line computer network and other merchandise carry "classic TV" into new realms. Cronin would like to make Nick at Nite itself a 24-hour channel in a few years.

Nick fans can expect to see *Happy Days* join the lineup in the fall of 1996 and *Hill Street Blues* — a rare drama on a comedy-heavy lineup — this fall.

"We're going to treat *Hill Street* differently, playing it once a week at 10 p.m. on Sundays," Cronin says. "We hope to make it appointment television like *ER*."

So what shows does Cronin hope to secure in the future? *Cheers* and *The Brady Bunch*. A few more years down the road, he thinks two current hits, *Seinfeld* and *Home Improvement*, will deserve the "classic TV" label.

"*Seinfeld* is clearly a classic," he says. "There has not been a show with such a combination of great writing and physical comedy since *The Dick Van Dyke Show*."