

Something new to binge-watch: TV's rich history of itself

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In this Feb. 3, 2018 file photo, Judd Apatow arrives at the 70th annual Directors Guild of America Awards in Beverly Hills, Calif. A collection of 4,000 hours of video interviews recorded over more than two decades by the Television Academy Foundation will be available for free on a website. Apatow made use of footage from a Garry Shandling interview for a documentary released this year about the late comedian. The clips were licensed from the foundation, one of the ways it generates money to preserve and expand the archive's collection. (Photo by Chris Pizzello/Invision/AP, File)

Diahann Carroll recalls a date with Marlon Brando that yielded a slap and career advice. Robert Adler tells how he co-invented the TV remote control. Walter Cronkite shares his dismay over learning that White House pressure trimmed a CBS report on Watergate.

Their accounts are part of an extraordinary collection of 4,000-plus hours of video Q&As recorded over more than two decades by the Television Academy Foundation, the philanthropic arm of the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences, organizer of the prime-time Emmy Awards.

On Wednesday, a new website will make the full collection of 895 interviews—and counting—available free to all comers, who can watch complete interviews or search the curated treasure trove by individuals, shows, events, themes and more. Even such minutiae as the origin of TV catchphrases including "Come on down!" from "The Price is Right" is there.

The Interviews: An Oral History of Television

(TelevisionAcademy.com/Interviews) is a browser's delight. You can listen to producer Chris Carter's account of making "The X-Files," or hone in on how he cast Gillian Anderson and David Duchovny.

"The arrangement is key," said archive director Jenni Matz. "I've done research at the Library of Congress where they just point to a box and say, 'Dig.' What we've done is we've really dug through it for you, and we've sifted it and sorted it out and made it acceptable and searchable."

Some of the interviews, including those done in the early years on videotape and gradually digitized, were available online at Emmy TV Legends, which is being replaced by the new site.

"We are living in a digital, sound-bite world, and I believe that we are

enjoying a second golden age of television," said Madeline Di Nonno, foundation chair. "It's really critical that as the leading industry organization for television we stay relevant" and accessible to all, especially younger generations.

Judd Apatow is an unabashed archive fan. "I just love it," the producer-writer ("Freaks and Geeks," "Girls") said, calling its in-depth, hours-long interviews the "definitive record of people's careers and their feeling about it and approach to their work."

For a new documentary on the late Garry Shandling, Apatow licensed footage from what he called a "fantastic" interview the comedian recorded for the collection. Such commercial use is one source of the money needed to preserve and expand the archive.

The website was the mid-1990s vision of industry leaders including Dean Valentine and Thomas W. Sarnoff, who believed that first-person accounts of TV as a business, a creative medium and the national town hall deserved to be saved and, ultimately, made readily available to scholars, aspiring industry members or anyone with an interest in what TV is and who makes it.

"For my money, this project is the single most important contribution that certainly the foundation and maybe even the academy, aside from the Emmys, makes to the industry," Sarnoff said.

The archive has its roots in another, deeply somber one: the Shoah project, a University of Southern California-housed repository of meticulously cross-referenced interviews with Holocaust survivors and witnesses founded in 1994 by Steven Spielberg. There is no comparison between ensuring a record of Nazi inhumanity and the story of an industry, Valentine said, but it brought home what the passing of TV's founders meant.

"With their loss, memories of what happened in the early days of television and the creative ferment would be gone, too," he said.

He took his idea for a TV archive to Rich Frank, then president of the TV academy, and to Sarnoff, who was foundation chairman. Sarnoff, now 91, had a particular reason to value the medium's history: his father, David Sarnoff, pioneered the development of TV and created NBC, the first broadcasting network.

In 1996, the foundation taped six "pilot" interviews—industry lingo for an episode used to decide if a TV project passes muster. The subjects demonstrate the archive's wide range from the start: comedian Milton Berle; ABC founder Leonard Goldenson; makeup artist Dick Smith; Elma "Pem" Farnsworth, widow of TV technology inventor Philo Farnsworth; producer Sheldon Leonard; and casting director and network executive Ethel Winant.

Subjects can edit their comments but rarely do more than correct factual errors, Matz said.

Unexpected stories abound in the archives, such as Diahann Carroll's account of a Los Angeles dinner out with the young but already renowned Brando when she was building her career. As they left the restaurant he gave her a "little whack" on her rear.

"I turned around and gave him a whack right across his jaw," she recounted. He followed up the next day with a gesture of apology, sending her a selection of important books on acting and calling to encourage Carroll to "get out of this town," go back to New York and focus on her craft—which is what the Emmy- and Oscar-nominated Carroll did.

From the start, Sarnoff said, people were honored to contribute to the

archive and were candid in return.

"They realized they were being interviewed for history, and they told us everything they could."

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