



# HOLY COW! HISTORY: WAS AMERICA'S FAVORITE REDHEAD A RED? - INSIDE SOURCES

Posted on June 25, 2023 by J. Mark Powell | Inside Sources



Lucille Ball was no stranger to pressure. She'd appeared on stage and in live radio broadcasts and performed hilarious stunts before movie and TV cameras with equal ease.

But nothing was like the pressure facing her on Friday evening, September 11, 1953. Everything hinged on the response that would greet her from the 300 people waiting in the studio audience.

She found herself in countless zany predicaments over the years. But this one beat them all.

Lucille Désirée Ball was riding high as America sailed into the 1950s. Her father had died when she was three. (The only thing she recalled from that day was a bird getting trapped in the house, leaving her with a lifelong fear of the animals.)

Her dreams led her to the Big Apple at 17, the typical story of an aspiring actress: A little modeling, a few chorus roles on Broadway, then why not go west and try Hollywood?

Bit parts for Goldwyn and RKO. A two-reeler with the Three Stooges, another with The Marx Brothers, and a brief appearance with Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers.

She worked hard. The roles grew bigger. MGM eventually signed her. Still, stardom eluded her. In 1940, she married Cuban bandleader Desi Arnaz.

Her break came in 1948 when CBS Radio picked her to play a wacky housewife on a sitcom called "My Favorite Husband." It was a hit. TV was coming into its own then, and she was asked to develop the program for CBS Television. Lucy said she'd do it—provided Desi played her fictional husband. The network agreed, and in 1950 the couple sank everything they owned into Desilu Productions.

The gamble paid off. "I Love Lucy" debuted on Monday, October 15, 1951. It's terribly cliché, but here goes anyway: America fell in love with Lucy.

As Fall 1953 approached, "I Love Lucy" was the country's #1 TV program.

Then Congress came calling.

This was the time of the Red Scare when McCarthyism was in full bloom. While Soviet Communists were espousing world domination in Moscow, Americans fretted about homegrown Reds right here.

At the turn of the century, many social ideologies were floating around designed to improve life for the little guy. Many were pie-in-the-sky stuff from well-intentioned dreamers. Communism was one of them; its seed just happened to fall in fertile Russia, take root and grow. The problem was the Utopian dream quickly turned into totalitarian terror.

Most Americans didn't know that at the time. The Soviet Union was on the other side of the world. Some Americans naïvely joined the American Communist Party before World War II.

But times had changed, and the threat facing America in the 1950s was far from theoretical. Congress set about rooting out every Red it could find.

Hollywood offered a treasure trove of suspects. Actors and actresses, writers, directors, and producers alike were blacklisted on the mere suspicion of being a Communist or Communist sympathizer. The same held true for people who refused to testify when called. The 'scare' in the Red Scare was very real.

Which brings us to Summer 1953. Someone discovered Lucy's grandfather Fred Hunt had been a Communist 20 years earlier.

Then came the bombshell: Lucy herself had registered to vote as a Communist in 1936 and again in 1938. They even had her voter registration card to prove it.

At the very least, Lucy "had some 'splainin' to do."

Which was why one of the most famous women in America secretly sat down in a Hollywood hotel room and testified under oath to a congressional investigator.

Lucy explained that she was 25 in 1936 and dearly loved her eccentric Grandpa Fred. He had doted on her after her father died. He took her to vaudeville shows, carved dolls, and, most importantly, encouraged her acting dreams.

Regarding politics, he was a socialist kook, the family oddball always spouting off. Relatives rolled their eyes and tuned him out. Then the old man got it in his craw in 1936 that getting his entire family to register to vote Communist was a great idea.

Like many 20somethings, Lucille didn't give a hoot about politics one way or another. "It sounds a little weak and silly and corny now," she explained, "but at the time, it was very important because we knew we weren't going to have him with us very long. If it made him happy, it was important at the time. But I was always conscious of the fact I could go just so far to make him happy." She never voted Communist, she said, nor had ever intended to.

The congressmen who read her testimony were satisfied. There was no "there" there, they decided.

And that could have been the end of it—until columnist Walter Winchell breathlessly announced on his popular radio show the following Sunday night that "a top television comedienne has been confronted with her membership in the Communist Party."

There was no doubt who Winchell was talking about. The future of "I Love Lucy," and Desilu Productions was suddenly on the line.

It all came down to Friday, September 11, when the first episode of "I Love Lucy's" third season would be filmed.

Lucy and Desi finalized plans throughout the week, eagerly awaiting the verdict. She was a tower of strength; he was a bundle of nerves.

Unknown to anyone, the top brass at MGM and CBS quietly worked the phones that week, placing lots of long-distance calls from

Manhattan and Hollywood to Capitol Hill. Their message was savagely simple: Lucy meant money to them—big money. And Red Scare or not, they weren't giving her up.



To borrow our generation's terminology, Lucy was too big to fail.

Friday finally arrived. Desi met with MGM and CBS bigwigs, who said they stood with the couple 100 percent. Then sponsor Phillip Morris Tobacco said it was sticking with Lucy, too.

There remained one last group. What did the public think?

If Desi was nervous before, he was a basketcase that night. Desi did the pre-filming warmup. It was time to clear the air. He told the audience: Lucy wasn't a Communist. He and his wife hated everything Communism stood for. Desi's eyes filled with tears.

"And now," he continued, "I want you to meet my favorite wife—my favorite redhead—that's the only thing red about her, and even that's not legitimate—Lucille Ball!"

A volcanic eruption of pure, molten affection followed, an explosion of adoration as people sprang to their feet, proving that they really did love... well, you know.

Lucy smiled, bowed, waved, and left. There was another standing ovation later when filming ended. This time, Lucy went to her dressing room and broke down in tears.

The couple hosted reporters at their Desilu Ranch the next day. Lucy gave the same answers she'd given the government investigator. Ever the comic, she landed one zinger: "In those days (registering Communist) was not a big, terrible thing to do. It was almost as terrible to be a Republican." She had voted for Republican Dwight Eisenhower for president in 1952, she quickly added.

And so, as the old showbiz saying reminds us, the show went on. And what a show it was!

Lucy may have once registered Communist. But indulging an ailing grandfather was as American as it gets.