Contemporary Collectibles: Still plenty of life on Gilligan's island

by Linda_Rosenkrantz

For a show that ran a scant three years, and was predictable, lighthearted, escapist entertainment, "Gilligan's Island" made a disproportionately deep impression on the American psyche, both in its initial run and in reruns. It's surprising how many people remember its catchphrases, can do an imitation of Thurston Howell III, or can belt out "The Ballad of Gilligan's Island."

The show debuted on CBS in September 1964 and played its theme song for the last prime-time time exactly three years later, having been on a different night each season, and at a progressively earlier time. The premise was the age-old shipwrecked-on-a-desert-island theme, as seen in countless New Yorker magazine and other cartoons.

This time it was the small sightseeing boat "Minnow" that ran into a storm and was wrecked on the shore of an unidentified island in the South Pacific. The castaway characters, at least on paper, were a stereotypical mix: the genial skipper Jonas Grumby and First Mate Gilligan, his inept sole crew member, the blowhard millionaire Thurston Howell III and the somewhat ditzy wife he called Lovey, the sexy movie star Ginger Grant, Professor Hinckley - actually a high school science teacher - and a naive country store clerk named Mary Ann Summers.

But the talented cast - from Bob Denver as Gilligan to Jim Backus as Mr. Howell to Tina Louise as Ginger - with their sharp comedic timing, managed to elevate the characters above their caricatures and keep audiences laughing, despite critics trashing it for its inanity. Of course, there was more than a little suspension of disbelief required - best not to ponder how they kept fed and clothed and hygienic for three years.

The 36 episodes of the first season were shot in black and white (later colorized), while the second season's 62 episodes were seen in glorious color. The theme song - co-written in a few minutes by series creator Sherwood Schwartz - underwent some changes as well. In the pilot and first season it had a calypso/Pacific islands beat and different lyrics, recorded by a group called The Wellingtons; the next two seasons it had a more conventional pop sound, with a touch of reggae, and it is thought to have been performed by a group called The Eligibles.

The show did have an extended afterlife, with an endless series of reruns. In addition, there was a Saturday-afternoon animated version called "The New Adventures of Gilligan," to which five of the original cast - Bob Denver, Alan Hale Jr., Jim Backus, Natalie Schafer and Russell Johnson - lent their voices, running from 1974 to 1977, creating a fan base (and merchandising) of its own, and another, "Gilligan's Planet," in the 1982-83 season, as well as a successful two-part reunion special in 1978, "Rescue from Gilligan's Island," and a follow-up in 1979, "The Castaways on Gilligan's Island," with still another sequel in 1981, "The Harlem Globetrotters on Gilligan's Island."

FOR COLLECTORS

If you want to make your Gilligan memories concrete, there are a number of items out there. From the '60s, there are a 1965 board game by Game Gems, showing Mr. Howell, Gilligan and the Skipper on the cover; a flip-type set of 55 Gilligan trading cards from Topps that create a mini-movie when fanned (now very collectible, the set can reach into the four figures); coloring books; and a "Gilligan's Island" book published by Whitman.

The next decade saw items based on the animated series, including a Milton Bradley "The New Adventures of Gilligan" board game, a Dip Dots design book with a 20-page booklet, watercolor paints and a brush. There were also a Playskool "Gilligan's Island Floating Island" boxed play set and soft rubber figures of Gilligan, the Skipper and Mary Ann.

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