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Alan Wagner was responsible for a string of successful shows, including *M*A*S*H*, *Maude* and *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*.



The Hit Man

Alan Wagner revolutionized television with one hit show after another



Alan Wagner, to propose a TV version of Robert Altman's popular, yet controversial, comedy *M*A*S*H*. "It [had] never occurred to me ... a show that took [a look at] the problems of people facing death," Wagner remembered in author Allan Neuwirth's 2006 behind-the-scenes book *They'll Never Put That on the Air*. But as an executive already renowned for his sophisticated taste and skill for pushing the envelope, Wagner had an immediate answer to the unorthodox pitch: Yes.

CBS ON THE VANGUARD

Two years earlier, Wagner had championed another series; he finally sold some of the network's more reactionary execs on the story of a single career gal—he and the show's creators lost their argument to make Mary Richards a divorcee—making it after all in Minneapolis. *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* went on to become a comedy classic, and

so did many more of the daring sitcoms that the onetime standup comic similarly shepherded, such as *All in the Family* and *Maude*.

Earlier, in the late 1960s, concerned CBS execs had foreseen ratings failure in the new concept of animated holiday specials. But Wagner fought for TV show-cases for *Charlie Brown* and the *Grinch*—which remain perennial Christmas favorites even today. Eventually, under Wagner's leadership, CBS went on to greenlight *The Bob Newhart Show*, *Kojak* and *The Waltons*—more jewels in the crown of what came to be known as the top-quality "Tiffany" network.

THE ASCENT OF THE TELE-VISIONARY

Wagner, who died in December 2007 at age 76, began his corporate career in the late 1950s at ad agency Benton & Bowles, where he helped to develop *The Dick Van Dyke Show*. Soon, he jumped to that show's network, working a few levels below CBS development chief Mike Dann, from whom he ultimately took the reins in 1970.

"Everybody liked Alan Wagner, from [legendary CBS founder] Bill Paley on down," Dann says. "He was the most wonderful and most trustworthy man I ever had around. He would be honest about his likes and dislikes, and would even criticize me for decisions.

He was a man for all seasons, and as a result he was an invaluable assistant for my thinking and planning."

Wagner's subsequent tenure as the man in charge coincided with a politically volatile era; but in keeping up with a quickly evolving America, Neuwirth says, Wagner helped to revolutionize more than just television. "People forget," Neuwirth notes, that in the early 1970s, "CBS was at the forefront of so many of those [political] changes."

In 1982, Wagner left the network to become an independent producer and the first president of the Disney Channel, but found his true late-in-life calling in indulging his passion for opera as an author and lecturer. It was this high-art sensibility, Neuwirth says, that the native New Yorker brought to a network that in the era of *Gilligan's Island* and *The Beverly Hillbillies* had previously programmed more to the lowest common denominator. This type of contrast, Neuwirth says, was a key to Wagner's persona. "He was a very nice guy, but he was as tough as nails when he had to be," he says. "Very strong, stubborn and incredibly aggressive when he believed in something."

In an industry known for its revolving door at the top, Neuwirth says, "I think that's why he stayed in power as long as he did." **U**