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School Days

Although short-lived, *Square Pegs* was an early ancestor of today's teen sitcoms

Think of it as the high school yearbook photo Carrie Bradshaw wishes you wouldn't see.

Before Sarah Jessica Parker became a fashion icon by playing the couture-loving columnist Carrie—a role she reprises in this month's feature film version of the HBO hit *Sex and the City*—she was the badly dressed brainiac Patty Greene, part of the titular twosome on the 1982–83 cult CBS series *Square Pegs*.

TEENAGERS 101

Fresh off a five-year run writing for *Saturday Night Live*, *Pegs* creator Anne Beatts based the show on her own experiences growing up in suburban Somers, N.Y. She re-created her own hometown best friendship in wannabe social climbers Patty and the chubby-yet-chipper Lauren Hutchison, and populated the rest of the Weemawee High freshman class with time-tested pubescent prototypes: the jock, the preppy class president and the video game nerd.

She also threw in a dash of a show she had loved as a teen, the 1959–63 CBS sitcom *The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis*. When Dobie himself, the actor-turned-network exec Dwayne Hickman, turned up at Beatts' pitch meeting at CBS, "I knew it was a good omen," the writer remembers.

HIGH SCHOOL INSPIRATION

Hoping to appeal to a younger audience, CBS placed *Pegs* to lead off its Monday lineup at 8 p.m. Atypically filmed *not* in front of a studio audience but instead at an abandoned, WGA-era high school in Norwalk, Calif., the show came complete with classrooms, hallways, cafeteria and auditorium plucked right out of real life. The then-30-something writer did diligent research, even recruiting a friend's 14-year-old daughter to ensure that her characters' story lines and their now legendary lingo—like rich girl Jennifer's Valley Girl-speak—rang true. Beatts also chose then up-and-coming girl group



Amy Linker, left, and Sarah Jessica Parker starred in *Square Pegs* from 1982 to 1983.

The Waitresses to perform the show's now-beloved theme song; indeed, her insistence on filling Weemawee's halls with music has unwittingly turned her show into the perfect New Wave-era time capsule. But ironically, like its resident musician character Johnny Slash, *Square Pegs* ultimately proved to be too cool for school. After scoring disappointing ratings—numbers that today would qualify it as a megahit—*Square Pegs* flunked out after only 20 episodes.

THE NEXT GENERATION

Despite the show's short life, the characters of *Square Pegs* nonetheless became progenitors of similar kids in teen films like *The Breakfast Club*. By the '90s, the show's spirit had spawned other network series, such as the WB's *Popular*, which was created by Greer Shephard, the daughter of a CBS executive who had been one of *Pegs*' champions. But unlike those similarly short-lived teen shows, Beatts

notes, "*Square Pegs* was a comedy. It was different because it was based on the premise that someday you'll look back on all this and laugh."

With a full-series DVD box set—packed with extras like recent interviews with Parker and other cast members—to be released in late May, Beatts is hoping that *Square Pegs*' original fans will have the opportunity to do just that. Most, she surmises, are now parents of teens themselves, and so she hopes that they will pass down their love for the show to a new generation of fans. Now 61 and teaching sitcom writing at the University of Southern California's School of Cinematic Arts, Beatts says that it's often hard for her to believe that 25 years have passed since Patty, Lauren and their classmates left the air. "They all inhabited different parts of my brain," she says. "And no matter how old I get, there will always be a part of me that is still Patty Greene." **U**