

# From Beulah to Julia

Michael Jay

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Liberation News Service — Paul Krassner once had an article in *The Realist* about the death of actress Louise Beavers, who used to play the part of Beulah on the television series of the same name. Beulah was a fat, dumb but lovable, black woman who shuffled around the suburban home of a benevolent white family, frequently saying, “Yes. Mister Harry,” to the head of the family she worked for.

Those were the days of “Amos and Andy,” and the civil rights movement was just beginning to grow. It seems a lot longer ago than it actually was.

Anyway, the *Realist* piece talked about how Louise Beavers had been used. She was a college graduate, a good actress, and not particularly fat. She had to learn to speak like the Beulah character. They even made her gain weight for the part, a demand that was cruel and damaging to her health. When she died, the mass media managed to find a short paragraph or two to say about her. Krassner was careful not to put her down for the role she had played. It is not easy now for black actors to get work. It was harder then.

The scene changes and television has to stop showing the “Amos and Andy” reruns and they will never produce another show with a character like Beulah. So for a couple of years they confined themselves to guest shots by Sammy Davis Jr. (I’m not talking now of “variety” shows, but of filmed series.) Then they tried Bill Cosby in “I Spy,” as a faithful agent of U.S. imperialism.

The deaths of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy and all of a sudden television has a conscience. This year they have a whole crop of black actors and actresses in a variety of roles.

But the characters are all sterile. They have taken Sidney Poitier and adapted him for television. To watch Poitier movies you would think he never gets a hard-on. And TV has taken the whiter than white Poitier thing and is creating a new stereotype.

Instead of Beulah, we have Julia. Diahn Carrol plays the part: of a widow with a small child who lives in a luxury apartment. In the course of her plastic life she encounters various mild indignities and the program makes its point that prejudice is no good.

Example: Her kid is missing so she calls the cops. Two cops arrive and instead of talking to Diahn Carrol they begin talking to one of her white friends who is visiting. See, they thought Diahn Carrol was the maid.

Example: In the same episode it turns out the kid isn’t missing at all. He hid in the truck of the telephone repairman. The repairman, a young black man, drives the kid home and says to him, “I could lose my job for this...” whereupon Diahn Carrol says, “That’s really swell of you risking your job to bring my kid home,” and the repairman replies, “I don’t care so much about the job. I’m studying engineering at night school. Education is important you know...” and Diahn Carrol says, “Yes, especially studying engineering at night school. Education is important you know...” and Diahn Carrol says, “Yes, especially for us.” Get the point?

Then there is something called “Mod Squad.” It is about three cops who are supposed to be young and hip. One of them is black and wears his hair Afro. It manages to touch all bases.

Example: “When will these kids learn to run to a cop instead of away from him?”

Example: “How does a high school kid get himself a gun?” sighs the white hip cop. “It’s easy, Pete,” says the black associate, “you just walk up to the counter and buy it...just like bubble gum.”

Example: The cops have just helped cause the death of a black high school kid who was mixed up in some stolen car ring. His girlfriend is thinking about quitting school. So the black hip cop who has disguised himself as a teacher to pump information from her (which helped lead to the death of her boyfriend) comes on as follows: “It’s a crazy world, but at least if you stay in school you have a chance to make it.” She seems unconvinced so he looks heavenward and says, “Some men see the world as it is and say ‘why’, I see the world as it should be and say ‘why not.’” Then he looks at the girl and says, “You know who said that?” And she says, “A great man and he died for it, too.” (Robert Kennedy dies in June and October they have him immortalized in “Mod Squad:”)

There are others with more of the same shit. The point is that there are more black women in the country who have to sell their labor to white people to get by, like Beulah, than there are who live in luxury, like Julia.

And a really good TV show would be one about a black maid and what she really thinks and how she really lives. But that won’t happen until the media belong to the people. And by then there won’t be any black maids.

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