

# The

# CUBAN

# and the

# REDHEAD



With their antics in "I Love Lucy,"

Desi Arnaz and Lucille Ball hold up a comic mirror to all the foibles of wedded life.

Is their own marriage as goofy as their hit show? You'll find the answer in this behind-the-scenes glimpse of the top husband-and-wife team on television



by **Jack and Madeline Sher**

**O**N MONDAY evenings a curious thing takes place across the United States. Men, women, and children gather in their living rooms to spend a half-hour with a unique husband-and-wife team which has, almost overnight, shot from relative obscurity to the top of the entertainment heap.

At first glance this oddly paired couple appears to have little in common, either with each other or with the plain family folk who find their weekly antics so amusing. The wife, Lucy, is portrayed by a glamorous, pink-haired, platter-eyed, wide-mouthed extrovert movie actress named Lucille Ball who thinks so little of her undeniably beautiful face that she cheerfully allows it to be struck with custard pies or equivalent. The husband, Ricky, is played by Desi Arnaz, a stocky, dark-haired, handsome Cuban with a winning smile and a genuine Spanish accent. They are husband and wife in real life, as well as on their CBS television program.

Desi was a little-known rumba-band leader until the "family situation comedy" he and his wife dreamed up, *I Love Lucy*, catapulted them both into national popularity to the surprise of almost everyone in show business except themselves.

As the Cuban and the redhead return to the airwaves this fall after a summer vacation, they find themselves in the

No. 1 spot on the network TV ratings—a pinnacle until recently monopolized by the perennial Milton Berle and Arthur Godfrey. Just why Mr. and Mrs. Arnaz appear to have caught the fancy of the public is difficult to pin-point. Some say it lies in the title: *I Love Lucy*—that everyone does just that, and hence this must be a case of mass infatuation. But that (Continued on page 100)



OldMagazineArticles.com



## **The Cuban and the Redhead**

---

(Continued from page 27)

theory rules out the womenfolk and the youngsters, who are every bit as enthusiastic as the men.

Personally, we were confirmed *I Love Lucy* fans for months before we began to realize why. We didn't become addicts deliberately; it was a habit that engulfed our whole family gradually. The captivating thing about Lucy and Ricky is, we think, the fact that they hold a mirror up to every married couple in America. Not a regulation mirror that reflects truth, nor a magic mirror that portrays fantasy. But a Coney Island mirror that distorts, exaggerates, and makes vastly amusing every little incident, foible, and idiosyncrasy of married life.

In the Sher family, we encounter the usual difficulties in trying to run our household smoothly. In the Ricardo family, these difficulties are carried through to a logically illogical and hilarious conclusion. When Lucy tries to bake bread and puts in too much yeast, a monster loaf bursts out of the oven and pins her helpless to the wall. When she descends to the basement and accidentally locks herself in the home freezer, she returns in consternation, completely encrusted in icicles. When her furnace, like yours and ours, explodes, she is blown up through the floor in blackface, singing *Mammy*. Upset (like wives the world over) when Ricky insists on growing a mustache, Lucy tries to make him take it off by gluing onto her own fair countenance a complete set of nonremovable Santa Claus whiskers.

Behind the laughter of the average husband watching such uninhibited antics is the unspoken observation: "There but for the grace of her conventional upbringing goes *my* wife." And the average wife, studying Lucy's gay but diabolically clever handling of her husband, murmurs to herself: "Oh, how I wish I had the nerve to try that—just *once!*"

After the Monday-evening guffaws have died down, a natural question arises: What are Lucille and Desi *really* like? Are they merely a couple of skilled actors convincingly playing screwball parts, or are their weekly comedy capers inspired by similar marital antics at home?

**W**HEN this question arose in our family, we were fortunately in a position to seek the answer. It so happens that we live in southern California, not too far from the Hollywood studio where Mr. and Mrs. Desi Arnaz film their programs, and even closer to the ranch house in the



## The Cuban and the Redhead



the sound stage. To find them, we picked our way through a hodgepodge of portable dressing alcoves, make-up tables, lamps, and stools to reach a cluster of canvas-backed chairs off in a dim corner. Some of these were lettered: "Desi Arnaz, Pres.," "Lucille Ball, Vice Pres.," "Vivian Vance, Girl Actress"; "William Frawley, Boy Actor"; and the like.

While we were waiting for Lucille and Desi, we talked with Vivian, the plumpish blond woman who plays Ethel Mertz, Lucy's girl-friend on the show. She recalled that on one excruciatingly hot day last summer, the cast, after a long session before the cameras, began shedding their clothes.

She and Lucy, their hair in curlers, without make-up, wearing only shorts and halters, began playing cards. Desi and Ethel's husband, Bill, stretched out on the floor in their damp undershirts. Suddenly through the door came a contingent of out-of-town ladies on a conducted tour of the studio.

"Lucy and I just sat there staring at them with our mouths open," Vivian said. "They were all be-ribboned, be-hatted, and be-orchided. Some of them even had gloves on. When the guide said to them, 'This is the *I Love Lucy* company,' you should have seen the unbelieving expressions on their faces. They're probably still talking about how awful we looked, and I don't blame them."

**S**OON Lucy joined us. After we had exchanged greetings we told her that we had come to have some questions answered. A moment later her hairdresser arrived and took her in charge. As he worked over her, she suddenly turned to us and, in her familiar flip manner, said, "Okay. Let's get going. Start asking."

Screwing up her face, she made a helpless Chaplinesque gesture, as though she felt sure our questions would lead her into some sort of horrible trap. We laughed. Much of the carrot-topped star's humor is visual. Later, knocking about the studio with her and Desi, and



## The Cuban and the Redhead

---

during many evenings at their home, we laughed more at Lucy's adroit facial expressions than at what she said.

"Some job he has," Lucy grimaced, referring to the hairdresser, "trying to make this henna of mine behave."

On the show and in real life Lucy is always kidding or being kidded about the odd, off-beat color of her hair. She is not at all sensitive about it. Her hair, which originally was light reddish in color, has been dyed its present startling pinkish red hue because it photographs better.

Desi came hurtling into the room to have his make-up freshened. Lucy grabbed him as he went by. "So park a minute," she said. "Talk it up a little."

Desi sat down, looking uncomfortable. At work, he has as much nervous energy and vitality as his wife, but is more reticent personally. Lucy egged us into bringing up the question of how they happened to fall in love. Desi squirmed.

"De-s-sie," Lucy drawled it out in the same tone Ricky uses on the show to get Lucy to confess a mistake. "De-s-sie, tell them!"

"He didn't like her at first," the hairdresser put in.

"She looked awful. Very toughie," Desi said. "You see, it was how she was all made up, like a burlesque queen."

"I was playing a burlesque queen in a picture called *Dance, Girl, Dance*," Lucy interrupted, "and George Abbott, the producer, brought me to see Desi because they were looking for an actress to play opposite him in a movie called *Too Many Girls*."

"She is wearing white feathers and her hair is all frizzled," Desi shuddered, "and she's got a black eye painted on, and so I take Abbott aside and I say, 'What kind of a girl is this? This is no sweet, ingenoonish type—'"

"Ingénue type," Lucy corrected him.

"Ingénue—ingenoonish, what's the difference?" Desi went on. "You looked tarrible. But I saw her again a few hours later in the rehearsal hall. No make-up, nice sweater and skirt, and then I said 'Hello!' to myself. This was different!"

"Some line he had!" Lucy said. "He asked me if I could rumba. I said no. He said good—he would teach me. I went out with him to learn how to rumba, and all we did was sit around and yak, yak, yak. Never got to dance once."

The fact that a small-town American girl and the scion of a wealthy Cuban family eventually met on a Hollywood sound stage and later got married is routine when compared to the things that happened to them *after* their marriage.

The redhead was born in Butte, Mont., daughter of a mining engineer and a concert pianist. Her family moved to Wyandotte, Mich., and later to Jamestown, N. Y., where Lucy took piano lessons under her mother's supervision, studied dancing, and dreamed about hitting the



## **The Cuban and the Redhead**

---

big time.

At 15 she got her mother's permission to enroll at the John Murray Anderson Dramatic School in New York. "At the end of the first year," she grimaced, "they advised Mom to stop wasting her money. I was no actress." So she quit.

**D**ETERMINED to make a monkey out of her dramatic teacher, Lucille went out the next morning and landed a job in the chorus of the third road company of *Rio Rita*. After five weeks of rehearsal, she was fired. The director's opinion was the same as her teacher's. Three more chorus jobs followed, each ending with Lucy being sacked before the rehearsal period was over.

She explains it all by saying she was shy—and, besides, she did not know how to dance. So she got a job behind the soda counter in a New York drugstore, and studied modeling on the side. Before too long she was a model for Hattie Carnegie, famous dress designer. Just as the modeling business was shaping up nicely for her she was injured in an automobile accident. She spent eight months in the hospital and the next three years learning how to walk again.

Before long she was back as a model and made some movie screen tests, all of them flops. Then one day she ran into a girl who was supposed to go to Hollywood as one of a dozen "Goldwyn Girls," but whose mother decided at the last minute not to let her make the trip. Lucy got on the phone, got the job, and went to Hollywood. Her first film as a bit player was *Roman Scandals* with Eddie Cantor. After a number of other pictures her first big part came in *Roberta*, but she never got a chance to show her real talent—comedy.

**W**HEN Lucy met her Cuban in Hollywood in 1940 he was a band leader who had been in musical comedy. But his accent was against him in the movies, with the result he was typed to play only Latin-American singers.

He was born in Santiago, Cuba, son of the mayor, and was given the imposing name of Desiderio Alberto Arnaz de Acha III. Desi led a platinum-plated life as a youth, enjoying such luxurious playthings as speedboats, sleek cars, and race horses, his father being the richest man in those parts.

In 1933 came the first Batista revolution. Papa Arnaz was thrown in jail, his property confiscated. Young Desi and Mamma fled to Miami. From there they began an eventually successful campaign to get Papa out of the hoosegow, while Desi went to high school. He took on such odd jobs as truck driving, train-yard checking, and taxi driving. He had trouble with his English, once getting five bowls of soup when ordering his meal in a restaurant, but this did not keep him from getting a fairly decent job



## **The Cuban and the Redhead**

---

playing the guitar and singing with a hotel orchestra.

Next came a year's apprenticeship with Xavier Cugat's band, after which Desi launched his own musical group. He played around in night clubs, and in 1939 was offered a role in George Abbott's Broadway musical, *Too Many Girls*, as a drum-beating Cuban football player. That led to an offer to play the same part in the movie version. And that led to Hollywood and Lucy.

After working in the picture together, the redhead ran into him again in New York, where he and his band were booked. Early in November, 1940, they whizzed up to nearby Greenwich, Conn., one afternoon and got married.

It was a marriage that continued as it began—on the run. While Desi and his band were playing engagements in one part of the country, Lucille was making pictures in Hollywood. Even though they bought a ranch house in Northridge, in the San Fernando Valley about 20 miles from Hollywood, and tried to establish some sort of regular home life, Lucy was an "orchestra widow" most of the time.

"We once figured out," Lucy said, "that we spent over \$30,000 in long-distance calls. Between Desi's English and bad phone connections, I began to feel like an operator on a South American switchboard."

Even when Desi was home there wasn't much real home life. Lucy had to be up at 5:30 in the morning so she could get to the studio on time, while Desi, playing at the Mocambo, a Hollywood night spot, slept until noon. By the time Lucy got home he was leaving for the band stand.

Arguments and disagreements soon arose. They always had wanted children—lots of them—but for twelve years they were unable to have any. Lucy lost two babies before they reached full term. In 1943 Desi went into the Army to work in a Special Service outfit, where he organized a band to entertain soldiers in hospitals across the country.

Desi got his Army discharge in 1945, and for a few months life was ideal. Then the old arguments about out-of-town engagements versus Lucy's movie career began all over again.

"I kept packing my bag and storming out of the house," Desi grinned. "But it was such a long drive to a hotel that I finally built myself what you call a doghouse out by the swimming pool. Every time we'd get mad at each other, I'd go out there."

The "doghouse" was in reality a tiny guest cottage, complete with kitchen, bedroom, and bath. The final blowup came one night when several couples were visiting Desi and Lucy and one of them got involved in a domestic quarrel. The wife retreated to the bathroom for a



## **The Cuban and the Redhead**



good cry. Lucy took the part of the wife. Desi maintained it was none of her business. Other couples began taking sides, and before the evening was over, nobody was talking to anybody.

"Except the couple who started it," Lucy said. "They went home arm in arm."

Lucy and Desi kept up their argument long after the last guest had departed, with the result that this time Desi packed his bags and headed, not for the cottage, but for the car. Furious, Lucy grabbed an over-sized cigarette lighter from the table, ran to the car, and pointed it dramatically at Desi, hoping he would think it was a gun. When she pulled the trigger and the flame lit, Desi calmly took out a cigarette and helped himself to a light. Then he slammed the car door and drove off.

Lucy filed for divorce, and they both sulked for several months before trying a reconciliation. One morning very early Desi awoke, to see Lucy getting dressed. As she was not working in a picture, he was puzzled.

**AFTER** a lot of hemming and hawing Lucy admitted she was headed for court to pick up her divorce papers from the judge.

"Okay," Desi said. "Go get 'em and come back to bed."

Lucy did. The divorce never became final.

Soon afterward, Desi came up with the idea that they jointly form Desilu Productions, a company of their own, which would team Lucy and himself, and in which Lucy would have her first chance to use the full range of her comic talents. When a radio show which Lucy had been appearing on between pictures went off the air, the Arnazes told producer Jess Oppenheimer that they wanted to play themselves, as a husband-and-wife team, on television.

Oppenheimer liked the idea, but he could not convince the advertising-agency men and the big shots of broadcasting. So they tried something else.

"We decided to take ourselves directly to the people," Lucy said, "and let the baseball bats fall where they might."

The Cuban and the redhead put together a series of wild, slapstick routines involving a movie star who tries to get into her band leader husband's act. They armed themselves with a wardrobe full



## **The Cuban and the Redhead**

---

of eccentric costumes and billed themselves as "Desi Arnaz & Band with Lucille Ball."

The act opened in a Chicago vaudeville house. Audiences got a kick out of Lucy's desperate attempts to prove she had a place in her husband's band. In baggy pants, she thumped a cello, tried to be a glamorous torch singer, and danced a fantastic number called "Cuban Pete" which involved plenty of slapstick falls.

The day after the act opened, Lucy discovered she was pregnant. Desi wanted to call the whole deal off, but Lucy, excited by her first opportunity to be a real comedy star, refused. They went on playing theaters in Milwaukee, Buffalo, Kansas City, Minneapolis, Detroit. They collected a scrapbook full of rave reviews and wound up the act in San Francisco. As soon as they got home Lucy went to bed. Two days later she lost her baby.

**T**HE following week she and Desi walked into the offices of a television executive and put their scrapbook on his desk. He was impressed, but not enough to put up any money. So Desi and Lucy, under the banner of Desilu Productions, raised their own funds. CBS, somewhat doubtfully, agreed to sell them time on the air.

Two months later, with rehearsals for the pilot show of *I Love Lucy* just getting under way, Lucy was pregnant again. When the first film was shot, she was 7 months pregnant. Lucy Desiree was born in July, 1951, and the first *I Love Lucy* show starring Mamma and Papa Arnaz made its debut just three months later.

Almost from the first, the show has paid off. Lucy and Desi own it lock, stock, and barrel, and get all the profits. Desi handles the business end, hires all personnel, works closely with the producer, director, and cameraman in cutting and editing the film. He makes the musical arrangements and has the final say on script policy.

"Me, I just act and sweep the floor," Lucy says.

Since the show started, Lucy has turned down at least ten offers to star in films—more offers in a shorter length of time than she has ever had before. Right now the couple plan to make their own full-length motion picture, in their own way, under their own banner.

Meanwhile, life has become more relaxed. One Sunday night, a few days after we had talked with Lucy and Desi at their Hollywood studio, we went to their ranch at Northridge. To reach it, you drive through the sprawling San Fernando Valley. The ranch sits on five acres of ground and comprises a rambling one-story house, a barn, some stables, a swimming pool, and the handy "doghouse." They bought it ten years



## **The Cuban and the Redhead**



ago for the ridiculously low sum (by Hollywood standards) of \$18,000.

As we turned from the road into the flood-lighted driveway, we got the feeling we were dreaming our way through a movie set. The drive is lined with tall, flowering shrubs, and the scent from the orange grove that screens the house is pleasantly intoxicating.

On week nights you usually find Desi and Lucy alone. Lucy (who is pregnant again as this is written) likes to wear green slacks and slippers, while Desi generally has on an old pair of pants with his shirt hanging out. Three spaniels and a wire-haired terrier wander in and out of the rooms. While their everyday life does not involve quite as many wild situations as their writers cook up for them on the show, their conversation and attitude toward each other are essentially what you see on *I Love Lucy*.

On Sunday nights relatives and friends gather. We walked in when the entire Ball-Arnaz clan was watching television in the living room. Lucy was rocking the baby in a toddler as she watched a song-and-dance number.

"Boy, I wish I could sing and dance like that kid!" she moaned, with honest admiration.

In a chair behind Lucy sat Señora Lolita Arnaz, Desi's mother. Near her was Lucy's mother, a tall, older version of her daughter who often takes care of the baby. Cleo Morgan, Lucy's sister, was sprawled on the floor with her 5-year-old son. Kenny, Cleo's husband, who handles publicity for Desilu Productions, was on the sofa with Desi. Several neighbors drifted in as the show was in progress, with Mrs. Ball and Lucy hopping around fixing drinks and coffee.

Desi's mother lives in Hollywood and spends week ends at the home of her son and daughter-in-law. In family spats she lines up with Lucy, while Mrs. Ball takes Desi's side.

**L**UCY is a worrier by nature. This sometimes leads to arguments. Desi started explaining one night that Lucy frets about people and things too much.

"Lemme alone," Lucy retorted, in a Dead End Kid accent. "Lemme explain myself."

"Nobody can explain you, honey," Desi said. Then, turning to us, "If she hasn't anything else to worry about, she worries what I'm *thinking*. It drives me crazy! If I'm quiet for two minutes she



10

## **The Cuban and the Redhead**

---

has to ask me what I'm thinking about. Then, if I tell her, she says I'm making it up!"

Lucy squirmed in her chair.

"And, another thing, she doesn't know how to relax."

"I can so relax!" Lucy said, jumping up wide-eyed and waving her arms.

"Okay, okay," Desi said. "Do I have any habits that annoy you, honey?"

Lucy's mouth fell open, her eyes froze in a pop-eyed stare, her entire body assumed the position of an outraged female, hands held rigidly at her side, neck stiff.

"She means yes," Desi said, laughing.

Lucy objects to Desi's loud snoring, and claims it's because he sleeps on two pillows. She's always jerking one out from under his head.

"She's freezing me out all the time," Desi continued. "All the time I have to go around and shut up the windows."

One night we watched Lucy make three trips to the thermostat to turn down the heat. When she would come back, Desi would quietly leave the room and turn the heat back on. This eventually led to a minor hassle, with Desi giving in and putting on a jacket.

Most of the friends who come to their house are picture people—Dean Martin and his wife, the Alan Ladds, Eve Arden, writer-director Frank Tashlin, Charles Ruggles, to name a few. There are books everywhere, stacked in disorderly piles. Lucy explained that Desi has an enormous appetite for reading.

"He reads *everything*," she says. "Even the labels on old grocery cartons."

Sometimes Lucy and the housekeeper plan in detail a dinner for guests, and just as it is about to be served, Desi rushes into the kitchen in a sudden burst of culinary inspiration and cooks up a special combination of dishes of his own.

"It drives me and the housekeeper nuts," Lucy said.

"We used to have an apartment in town," Desi said, "but we gave it up."

They exchanged looks, laughed, and Lucy explained what they now consider another idiocy from their past.

"We'd stay in town to see a movie or play a game of cards with friends or go to some studio function," Lucy said. "Then we'd go to the apartment, have a snack out of the refrigerator, and get ready for bed. Just as we'd start climbing into bed, Desi would let out a huge sigh and say, 'Let's go home.' Then he'd get that wistful look on his face, so we'd get out of bed, get dressed, and drive out here."

Now their only Hollywood apartment is the set where *I Love Lucy* is filmed. On Friday nights, after the final scene has been shot, Lucy goes back to the ranch house and little Lucy, while Desi takes off for Balboa, a busy little harbor town on the way to San Diego where he keeps his boat. He stays on the boat until Sun-



## The Cuban and

### the *Redhead*

day evening. Each forgets show business until Monday morning—Desi fishing, sailing, and loafing; Lucille staying home like an average mother and housewife.

Their friends think this plan of spending week ends apart is another example of the screwball goings-on which have always characterized their married life.

**LUCILLE** is the first to admit that they are “not completely like average people,” but she stoutly defends their going their individual ways on week ends.

“Maybe it does sound sort of funny,” she says, “since it’s true we did spend years trying to figure out a way to be together more. Well, now we are. We’re together all week, much more together than most couples. And, like most couples, we need a little time apart, a short vacation from each other. It gives us a more balanced married life. Then, when Sunday night rolls around, we’re really happy to see each other again, and to start a new week as Ricky and Lucy. “Well”—her pert manner zipped to the fore again—“what’s so goofy about that?”

Probably it isn’t goofy at all, for as long as Lucy and Desi Arnaz continue to live happily together, maintaining their week-end “balance,” a number of people all across the continent will also be able to start their week happily—with laughter—on Monday nights.



THE **American**  
 SEPTEMBER 1952