

Turn-On

The comedy show that pissed off America

Turn-On

A
fast
paced
new
comedy
series
with
guest
looney
Tim
Conway
and an
outstanding
cast of
other
loonies

abc **New 7:30pm** 9

ABC's original ad for *Turn-On*, featuring the first (and only) guest host, Tim Conway, from February 5, 1969.

On the evening of Wednesday, February 5, 1969, some 17 million viewers across the United States tuned in to the ABC Television Network to see the premiere of a new, heavily-hyped half-hour comedy-variety show called *Turn-On*. It was supposed to be a “new form” for the television medium. Something hip and topical and innovative. But by the time it was over, thousands of outraged viewers flooded the phone lines at ABC headquarters and local ABC stations to complain. A few of the local stations bumped out of the show before it was over and many more vowed never to carry it again. Before next week's episode could be shown, the program was cancelled, never to be seen again.

The miscalculation of the public's stomach for the far-out, colorful, adult-orientated program caught the network and producers off guard. Several episodes had been taped in advance but the network decided there was no choice but to cancel it immediately, before the lynch mobs showed up at the door.

What made *Turn-On* so repugnant to 1969 audiences would likely seem tame in today's anything-goes popular culture. As a matter of fact, many of the outraged viewers, when asked, couldn't pinpoint exactly what it was that made them so angry. It was everything, the sights, the sounds, the colors, the lack of any structure or format. *Turn-On* was a big, bad acid trip on prime-time network television. Or perhaps an overstrained attempt at proving Marshall McLuhan's proposition, “The medium is the message.”

Turn-On was intended to be ABC's answer to NBC's hit *Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In*, with *Laugh-In* producers George Schlatter and Ed Friendly at the helm. *Laugh-In* had revolutionized TV comedy in early 1968 with a quirky, colorful, extremely fast-paced barrage of blackouts, skits, music and catch phrases (“Sock it to me!” “You bet your sweet bippy!”). While some initially found the show shocking and a little too irreverent, it quickly became a top-rated Monday night hit for NBC.

Turn-On would be something different; a hallucinatorically colorful barrage of fast-paced