If you're old enough to remember the days when television production was broadcast live, perhaps (like me) you have a certain fondness for the kind of energy and mistakes that can only happen in live programming. I don't mean TV programs that are "live," as the word "live" is most often used today, that special feeling of "being there." It was daily event programs that were something else entirely. The mistakes, the production "errors"—all made at the highest level, like NBC's "Today" and "The Tonight Show"—made the world seem more likable, riskier and exciting. I suspect it's called "the golden age of TV" because there was so much creative talent involved, but because the medium was being utilized to do what it does best, and what it only can do: transmit live in real-time over vast geographical distances.

 Somehow, this unique quality that didn't seem to get lost, forgotten, by the end of the '50s, may not have been fully appreciated or fully realized by the people that were in the industry. As Erik Barnouw points out in his book <i>Tube of Plenty</i> and <i>The Sponsor</i>, advertisers wanted safe, familiar, mass-appeal programming that would ensure consumerism and envy as a way of life. Live television was a small studio set, close-ups on faces—with an emphasis on psychological content. The psychological depth in the dramatic programming tended to make the commercials appear fraudulent. They were propaganda, after all, that any problem could be fixed with the purchase of product. So sponsors were basically investing in audiences with live broadcasting. They were an important factor in the push towards film (and later video) virtually all TV production.

 In general, viewers' preference was the episodic series, where the same characters and sets would appear weekly. This would ensure not only that production costs would be lower, but that once a sale was programmed premise had been created (complete with glamorous stars), the episodes could be churned out weekly with little danger of any contrariness sneaking in. Moreover, the series could easily match the commercials, providing a suitable context for them—glamorous sets and people, or simplistic solutions that didn't require any narrative for worry, anxiety, inner depth or political consciousness.

 But it's the episodes, not only could they be shot on location (Westerns were popular) or filmed anywhere, they would be guaranteed to be error-free. TV need only to find the recording, matching caption inventions of classic Hollywood cinema, wherein no human error or technical flaw could reveal the human and technological process of production. And this in a time when the industry would also mean that, just like feature films, TV programs could be distributed around the world to all those countries in the process of setting up their own TV networks.

 Well, for these and many other reasons, by the late 1950s American TV had become largely a filmed product made under the auspices of Hollywood film studios. The whole TV industry had changed to reflect a desire for safe production and strict control over all aspects of production. One aspect of programming to this end, a way, summarizes this whole ethos is the use of what's called "the track of light," the apparatus that generates pre-recorded light-tracks and moments, and to just the right seconds (as they say) the sound-track of TV productions.

 Not surprisingly, this "sweetening machine" was invented at the time the Hollywood studios were gearing up to produce the first filmed sitcoms and other filmed product that would soon take over the network airwaves. A man named Charlie Douglass, who had been a sound technician at NBC, set together a machine that could reproduce a wide variety of light-tracks—everything from a few quiet audience chuckles to uproarious crowds guffawing and applauding wildly.

 It was, of course, a timely invention in that most of the new filmed sitcoms of the day had no studio audience. Here, with Charlie's magic box, the production could be given the ambience of live TV. Better yet, there would be perfect control over this "audience." It would last at exactly the right moment, to just the right degree. All you'd have to do is let Charlie orchestrate the giggles, whoops, groans and bursts of hilarity into a perfectly tuned and time soundtrack, and your program would seem to be the most crowd-pleasing epitome of entertainment that even the airwaves could offer. Charlie Douglass first approached Desilu Productions in the mid-'50s, and the rest, as they say, is history.

 Despite the fact that Charlie kept his machine shrouded in secrecy and under lock and key, other independent talent sprang up to rival his position in the industry. Nevertheless, there was plenty of work for all. Canada, too, had been following United States TV production style, even though the broadcasting structure here was quite different and did not necessitate such imitation. As filming and then taped production overtook live broadcasting in Canada, Canadian TV producers, too, wanted to duplicate the American studio-audience response or replace it where necessary. As Peter Campbell, the managing editor of CBC's sound-effects department, puts it: "Until recently, guys like John Pratt and Charlie Douglass from the States would come to Canada and sweeten the shows." Eventually, a Canadian—Rafael Markowitz (now in California)—entered the busy sweetening scene with his own machine. Says Campbell, who worked with Markowitz for years, "It took us two-and-a-half years to get to what we wanted" in terms of variety of laffs. After all, competition was fierce. Not only did the CBC's American produced and co-creator of CBC's "Hangin' In," recalls that he had to "one-up" the Markowitz to record the live audience for "King of Kensington" in order to sweeten the show. "And we always wondered if Canadian laffs were being used for American shows. And the Canadian TV networks were strictly dependent on these traveling laff men who crossed the border with ease.

 But finally, CBC's crew of sound engineers took on the challenge and developed their own "sweetening machine" to build their own sweetening machine. Nobody I talked to could remember the historic date of its first use was, but everybody agreed that it was about the same time as the Markowitz, during the making of "King of Kensington." According to Joe Rhodes, the CBC's sound engineer, the laffs and applause were accumulated from studio auditions, "King of Kensington"—they are exclusively Canadian laffs... And people like Tom Wood and Peter Campbell, of CBC's special-effects department, are continuously upgrading the repertoire, adding diversity and nuance to the sweetening. Says Campbell, "You want to get a special feel, create character to match the show. It means having a whole range of sounds from a wide range of different-size accents. The machine can respond quite sensitively," says Partington, "generating little touches like 'ooohs and aahs'." For a show like "Hangin' In," which is taped without a studio audience, the sweetening technician and the associate producer go through the tape during the audio mix and dial in the appropriate sounds and what kinds of sweetener to add. "You feel like you're directing the show," Partington says, "making it seem live." The machine has 24 tracks and can help cut 6 of 7 of 8 of the sound effects. No weak! No problem. The repertoire of the sweetening machine can match the dimensions of the room, the size of
The Last Post in Retrospect

The Last Post is like Christ; it's not dead but merely sleepeth. Witness: the story of the Post. Admittedly the people who wrote for it have disappeared into darkness concumbre or have become victims of that lamentable activity described by actors as "doing a number". This is the life of teachers or work in media, possibly some of these latter holding onto that illusion perpetuated by "Red" Rudi Dutschke of "the long march towards a more just society" and that notion that the "orchestra. We may use some of the live response, and then we boost it with sweetener.

Of course, if sweetener is used, a bit too much of the "fun" and awards ceremonies, might it not also be used for other live broadcasts like political conventions, public speeches by politicians, etc.? "Not to my knowledge," says Professor Campbell, "but that doesn't mean it's not done. Just that I've never heard of it."

In a way, the sweetening machine is a useful metaphor for the institution of television itself—which has more to do with wish-fulfilment than reality. At a critical juncture in its past, the industry abandoned production values that highlighted its messy, complex, error-laden but risky and human vitality in place of a more sanitized, carefully adapted production conventions that guarantee tight control over all aspects of the telecast, all the illusion-making apparatus of Hollywood itself. The result is that TV offers (not only through its chosen content but also through its style of production) a smooth-running, error-free, sweetened world in which every problem is easily solved, every mistake is erased and eliminated, every event is convenient and discrete by whatever means necessary, and human complexity is rounded and flattened, to examine the real conditions of our lives, exploring in-depth the problems that exist. But TV has become the rose-coloured glasses for society, or (more accurately) the saccharine solution in which the status quo hangs suspended. By that I mean, it is often, is harsh, messy and bitter indeed.

No wonder so many North Americans are so impressed with their time in TV’s world rather than work to make the real world sweeter.

Joyce Nelson

The Last Post was born in the early 1960s, after the Toronto media screamed for Jean Drapeau to be next Prime Minister—what was before the balls came in. Canada was on the way to becoming what the philosopher Ortega describes as an ever-enlarging state. The magazine’s attitude to this state of affairs was best symbolized by The Last Post (as it was then called). The House of Commons—never having been to the Common House before, he was taken aback at what he saw and heard there. He showed the Honourable Members ranged on both sides of a vast swimming pool on the floor of the House, into which time to time, the defenders of our way of life seemed to be taking a drink.

And then of course Quebec happened. Here The Last Post’s courage was, I think, both informed and cogent. Bolstered by the good knowledge of Montreal that all its editors already admired, the smugness of the Anglo-Saxon elites, The Post proved to be an early and enduring Consensus for informed attitudes about the mail-storm there. It was probably the only part of its work it took with high degree of seriousness and, I suspect, it is for that it will be remembered.

I mentioned cheerily deliberately, it’s the only way I have of describing the Post. Of course, it was not an easy paper to write for. At the risk of blasphemy, I should venture to say that the Post had an American way of getting there—that is to say, a political game between two parties to get power for their friends. While the United Church, disguised as the NDP, bemoans the whole thing from the pew of the Pro-Life Advocate. Given such a low-minded view of the matter, it is not without significance there’s a typical Last Post opener right there: "it’s not without significance that Loughhead’s name starts with an L, just like Luchinav"—it’s not without significance that one of the Post’s columns was a gossip column. It was called, of course, "Last Post." Generally, the Post frowned upon a peculiarly Canadian "love of discipline," a love symbolized by the incident involving the bill featuring the backside of animals ridden by the leading police force, a case in which an attempt at a view of authority was not, I hasten to say, the particular preserve of the Post. At the 1974 Sticlian-novus Forum, with the awful daring of a moment’s surrender, published the Gras who told them that foreign ownership six months before the Cabinet received it.

However, the particular weakness of the Post also sprang from another source. It saw itself as being, if not necessarily axiomatic, as at least ruthlessly internationalist in its perspective. This displayed itself most immediately in its response to the Canadian media, whose attitude to their readers and viewers was, as the Post saw it, analogous to that of a lazy farmer towards his seeds: "Cover them in shit, keep them in the dark and hope they grow." And there were targets aplenty. Looking back, would it be fair to say that the Post would carry without question this became the model of the usually amenable Michael Marland: These "people (FLQ) have infiltrated every strategic place in the province of Quebec, everywhere where important decisions are taken ... There is an organization which has thousand of guns, rifles, machine guns, bombs and ... more than enough ammunition to blow up the core of downtown Montreal." Askin’s cartoon in response has become a famous "We are all the last on the list of suspects." But such an attitude also meant that the Post was, as I think, both informed and cogent. Bolstered by the good knowledge of Montreal that all its editors already admired, the smugness of the Anglo-Saxon elites, The Post proved to be an early and enduring Consensus for informed attitudes about the mail-storm there. It was probably the only part of its work it took with high degree of seriousness and, I suspect, it is for that it will be remembered.

The Last Post moved from Montreal to Toronto and soon began to die. As I knew it would. My perfectly cogent observation that Goethe had remained in Weimar and did not relocate to Berlin fell on deaf ears.

Still, I find nothing unhealthy about this. Most of the newspapers are disappearing. They should be like catherine wheels, cracking and spluttering around the surrounding dark for a while, leaving behind them a good, acrid stench to remind newness that rightous indignation had once been felt here. If I may make an observation: it’s a misfortune of the times that so many of themselves as organizations that should grow in size and circula-