Vance, Vivian (1909-1979) Encyclopedia Article

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In the early days of television when millions of Americans viewed small screen stars as personal friends, Vivian Vance became the nation's most celebrated neighbor. Vance, a Broadway veteran with credits for *Voice of the Turtle* and Jerome Kern's *Music in the Air,* rocketed to stardom as Lucille Ball's landlady and confidante on the immensely popular *I Love Lucy* show. Her character, Ethel Mertz, by nature homespun and pragmatic, wavers just enough in her resolve to be cajoled into participating in the hair-brained schemes of Ball's antic Lucy Ricardo. She also struggles to pump life into her happy but conventional existence with husband Fred (William Frawley). Vance proved to be Ball's ideal foil; their interaction helped make the sitcom the country's number one show from 1951 to 1957.

Vance's perennial good cheer on screen masked her personal frustrations and several bouts with mental illness. She resented the ease with which the public accepted her as Ethel Mertz. "Ethel is a frump," she lamented. "She's frowsy, she's blowsy, and talks like a man." Vance also grew increasingly dissatisfied with co-star Frawley; he was twenty-five years her senior and she complained, "He should be playing my father." Remarkably, the public remained entirely ignorant of the backstage feud between Frawley and Vance. Even after the secret leaked during the 1960s, an increasingly suburban America continued to view Fred and Ethel as representatives of a bygone era of neighborliness. Ironically, Vance's efforts on the *I Love Lucy* show helped popularize television, then a fledgling medium, and went a long way toward breaking down the traditional social patterns which Fred and Ethel Mertz represented.

Vivian Vance and Desi Arnaz

Further Reading:

Andrews, Bart. *Lucy & Ricky & Fred & Ethel: The Story of "I Love Lucy."* New York, Dutton, 1976.

McClay, Michael. *I Love Lucy: The Complete Picture History of the Most Popular TV Show Ever.* New York, Warner Books, 1995.

Wyman, Ric B. *For The Love of Lucy: The Complete Guide For Collectors and Fans.* New York, Abbeville Press, 1995.