

## Handout - Desi Arnaz

Examine each of the materials below, and answer the associated questions. Once the answers are complete, share what you learned about Desi Arnaz with your group.

### Biography

Desi Arnaz was born into a wealthy family in Santiago, Cuba in 1917 where his father was the mayor. After the overthrow of Cuba's President in 1933, Desi and his father left the country to go to Miami.

With the loss of wealth and status the family had in Cuba, Arnaz had to work random jobs until he got his break into the music industry with Xavier Cugat in New York. He later returned to Miami and introduced Conga music (based around the conga drum) and the "Conga Line" to Miami and American audiences.

After serving in a military hospital in California during WWII he continued to perform with a band and had small roles in films. Arnaz's big break in television came when he joined his wife, Lucielle Ball on *I Love Lucy* in 1951. The show was a comedy about the couple's marriage with Lucy (Ball) being an aspiring actress and Ricky (Arnaz) a Cuban bandleader.



Many people in the television industry were against Arnaz being in the show due to his Cuban heritage. Producers and the couple's talent agents asked "what typical American girl is married to a Latin"? After hearing no from multiple producers, Ball and Arnaz took the idea of the show on the road as a traveling performance known as a vaudeville act to prove it could be a success.

Soon, CBS gave in after the traveling act got rave reviews, but they still wanted to limit Arnaz's involvement. After further struggles to get the show produced, the couple finally succeeded and the show aired on CBS in October 1951. In his contract, Arnaz was to keep singing to a minimum because "no one would understand him". This was reversed, however, after it became clear the show was going to be a success with American audiences.

By 1952, *I Love Lucy* was being watched in 10.6 million homes and was the first television show to reach that many people in America. Americans would leave work early, close up shops and put off housework to tune in. While viewers tuned in every week to witness America's favorite couple and their antics, *I Love Lucy* incorporated Cuban culture and music to work against the conformity of the time period. The show was also revolutionary from a technical standpoint: under Arnez's direction, *I Love Lucy* used multiple cameras across adjoining sets while still in front of a live studio audience—a first for its time. The show also used new high-quality film, which would also make preserving footage possible and allow for reruns and syndication.

**Questions:**

1. What obstacles did Dezi Arnaz and Lucille Ball face when trying to get *I Love Lucy* on the television?

2. What do the obstacles Arnaz and Ball encountered imply about 1950s American society and the film industry?

## “Babalu”

One way that *I Love Lucy* combatted the conformity of the 1950s was when Arnaz included Latin songs into the show in his role as a Cuban band leader.

In 1950s America, if you did not live in a big city like New York or Miami, you may not have been exposed to Latin American music. The song “Babalu” was heard and played in many episodes of *I Love Lucy*.

The song was written by Cuban composer Margarita Lecuona and first recorded by Cuban singer Miguelito Valdes in 1941. However, it was Dezi Arnaz who brought it into the homes of Americans as Ricky’s signature song.



The song is in Spanish and is about one of the seven main gods of Santeria, an Afro-Cuban religion. Santeria was started in Cuba by the Yoruba people who were brought as enslaved people from West Africa. Santeria combines religious traditions of the Yoruba people and Catholicism.

## Activity

Listen to the song “Babalu” (<https://rb.gy/kkmek>) and the *Leave It to Beaver* theme song (<https://rb.gy/if522>). Then fill out the below chart:

### “Babalu”

1. What stands out to you about this song?

2. What instruments do you hear?

3. Does the song remind you of anything?

### *Leave it to Beaver* Theme Song

1. What stands out to you about this song?

2. What instruments do you hear?

3. Does the song remind you of anything?

**Questions:**

1. How are “Babalu” and the *Leave It to Beaver* theme song different?

2. Does the theme show for *Leave It to Beaver* align with what you have learned about the show? Why or why not?

3. How do you think the American public would have felt if they knew the song was about a god from an Afro-Cuban religion?

4. How does the song “Babalu” go against the conformity you have seen in 1950s television?