

game show!

*I chose my apparel, I wore a beer barrel
And they rolled me to the very first row.
I held a big sign that said,
"Kiss me I'm a baker and Monte I sure need the
dough."
Then I grabbed that sucker by the throat until he
called on me.
'Cause my whole world lies waiting behind door
No. 3.
— From Door No. 3, a song by Steve Goodman
and Jimmy Buffett*

By RICK WARNER
Staff Writer

In the beginning, there was the game show.

Before westerns and variety, before sitcoms and mini-series, before Howard Cosell and Walter Cronkite, television was in love with game shows.

They were primitive at the start, cut-rate offshoots of popular radio shows like "Quiz Kids" and "Stop the Music," but even then they struck a sympathetic chord. Ordinary people doing ordinary things — blushing, answering questions, looking for easy money — proved irresistible to large numbers of ordinary viewers.

For 30 years — from Bud Collyns to Bob Barker, from "Beat the Clock" to "Wheel of Fortune," from buzzers to gongs — game shows have endured. Moreover, they've endured in the most fickle medium of them all, where trends are monitored hourly and six weeks is considered the ultimate test of staying power.

"Soap operas and game shows are the great indigenous television forms," producer Mark Goodson once said. "They are alike in one important way. There are no endings. They go on and on and on."

Once a great scandal threatened to kill the form for good. But, like a counter-puncher on the ropes, game shows bounced back.

Today, despite evidence that game shows may be on the slide again, millions continue to watch as contestants spin wheels, make deals and guess prices in pursuit of fame and fortune.

One such contestant, a young naval pilot from San Diego named Thom McKee, recently broke an all-time game-show record by winning almost \$230,000 in cash and

merchandise on "Tic Tac Dough." The winnings included \$141,000 in cash, six cars, two sailboats, motorized water skis, camera equipment, a hot tub and 11 vacation trips to places like Rome, Paris, London and Tahiti.

And he's not done yet. McKee had beaten 30 straight opponents when the nationally syndicated show ended its filming for the season in May. When "Tic Tac Dough" resumes production in the fall, McKee will try to continue his streak.

Money, of course, has always been a prime attraction of game shows. But not only for the contestants.

"Game shows are incredibly cheap to make," said Robert C. Allen, an assistant professor in the Department of Radio, Television and Motion Pictures at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

"You've got one set, one host and that's about it. The talent is the audience. In a soap opera, you may have 40 or 50 people involved in production. But with game shows, you only need a handful."

Though game-show producers rarely disclose their profits, the heavy hitters like Goodson of Goodson-Todman Productions and Jack Barry of Barry-Enright Productions are said to be millionaires many times over.

"Proportionate to their costs," New York Times reporter Tom Buckley wrote last year, "the profits of game shows ... are the largest in an industry whose ordinary, everyday profits wouldn't be spurned by the sheikh of Abu Dhabi."

Still, money isn't enough to explain the enormous popularity of many game shows. Some of the most successful shows over the years, like "Concentration," "Jeopardy" and the current hit "Family Feud," have offered relatively little in material rewards. So why the appeal?

"I think a lot of it has to do with the concept of celebrity," said professor Allen, who teaches a course in American popular culture.

"Someone (Andy Warhol) once said that in our society, everybody gets to be a celebrity for 15 minutes. Well, game shows give the average person a chance to do that. He gets to be on national television, in front of millions of viewers, for maybe half

an hour and all of a sudden he's a celebrity.

"Meanwhile, the viewer sits at home watching all this and he says to himself, 'Hey, I can do that.'"

Marti Ballard, a ticket agent at Raleigh-Durham Airport, used to say that to herself when she watched "The Price is Right" at her home in Raleigh. Unlike most viewers, however, she got a chance to prove it. Last November, Ms. Ballard

went on "The Price is Right" and won more than \$2,000 worth of prizes in less than five minutes.

"It was one of the most exciting days of my life," she said. "You always wonder if it's going to be as much fun as it seems on television, and it was."

Ms. Ballard got so excited, in fact, that when the announcer shouted for her to "come on down" from the audience, she jumped out of her seat, tripped and

sprawled across the laps of a couple of strangers.

Ms. Ballard also experienced first-hand the strange filming schedule followed by game-show producers, who normally film a week's worth of shows in one day.

"When I saw the set (on Nov. 26), I couldn't figure out why they were using Christmas decorations," she said. "Then I

found out they were already filming the show for Christmas Day."

Though the public has a tendency to lump all game shows together, aficionados of the breed detect distinct subtypes. To the experts, putting "Password" and "The Gong Show" in the same category is about as precise as saying "Three's Company" and "M*A*S*H" are both situation comedies.

Professor Allen breaks game shows down into three basic categories — skill shows, greed shows and what he bluntly refers to as "idiot shows."

■ Skill shows — "These shows are almost like sports events," Allen said. "They're very big on competition and they're usually based on some kind of real skill or knowledge." Classic example: "Jeopardy." Current example: "Tic Tac Dough."

■ Greed shows — "These are the ones where they put the prizes on the stage and encourage the contestants to jump up and down and scream a lot," Allen said. Classic example: "Let's Make a Deal." Current example: "The Price is Right."

■ Idiot shows — "This is the kind of show that sees how far people are willing to humiliate themselves to get on television," Allen said. "The prizes are insignificant. It's being on television that counts." Classic examples: "The Gong Show," which was spun off into a movie this year, and "The \$1.98 Beauty Show."

The latter type, made popular by producer Chuck Barris, is part of a distressing trend in game shows, says syndicated television critic Gary Deeb.

"Up until the mid-'60s, most game shows required some kind of cranial activity," Deeb said in a telephone interview from Chicago. "But now, they're

strictly cheap entertainment. There's no mental stimulation at all."

Without a doubt, the most successful game show in history has been Goodson-Todman's "The Price is Right." Except for brief period in the early '70s, the show has been going strong for three decades. Originally hosted by Bill Cullen, the new version with Bob Barker is still one of the most popular shows on daytime television.

At one point in the 1950s, however, it appeared that game shows had reached the end of the road.

In those days, quiz shows like "The \$64,000 Question" and "The \$64,000 Challenge" were among the highest-rated shows on television, captivating prime-time audiences with an atmosphere of suspense and the lure of big money. Then along came a show called "Twenty One" and a young man named Charles Van Doren.

Van Doren, an assistant professor at Columbia University, became a national celebrity by beating dozens of challengers and winning \$129,000. He made the cover of Time magazine and almost single-handedly made "Twenty One" the most talked-about show on the air.

But then, in 1958, the roof began to cave in. Word leaked out that "Twenty One" and other big-money game shows were fixed. Contestants, it was alleged, were given questions ahead of time and coached by the producers on how to answer.

At first, everyone involved — including Van Doren and producers Jack Barry and Dan Enright — denied the charges. But after investigations by a New York grand jury and a congressional committee, the guilty parties confessed. No one went to jail, but all the big-money quiz shows were cancelled, and it was years before they returned to the air.

Today, Barry and Enright are back producing game shows and the scandals are viewed in Hollywood as ancient history.

"Times have changed and so have game shows," said Allen Koss, a producer for Barry-Enright Productions in Los Angeles. "There are so many rules and regulations governing game shows today, I don't think you could have that kind of scandal again.

"Back in those days, entertainment was the only guideline. You reached for a certain effect and didn't think that

much about how you achieved it."

Game shows may be more honest these days, but they aren't necessarily more popular. Koss says soap operas and talk shows have taken over much of the daytime market, while reruns of popular sit-coms like "Happy Days" are providing stiff competition in the prime-time access slot from 7-8 p.m.

Blaming a glutted TV syndication market, Chuck Barris Productions announced in March it was halting new production of its six game shows. Barris says production will resume when the market improves for syndicated programs.

The networks, which used to be bullish on game shows, now are showing a total of only six. Most game shows today are syndicated by their producers and sold to individual stations around the country.

In the Triangle area, station officials say they have noticed a slight decline in game-show ratings.

"'Joker's Wild' and 'Tic Tac Dough' were big hits for us when we started showing them, but they've dropped off this year," said Jim Duncan, program director at WTVD (Channel 11) in Durham. Starting in September, Duncan said, the shows will be replaced by "Family Feud" and reruns of "M*A*S*H."

One of the reasons some stations are dropping game shows is the type of audience they attract. Game shows have been around for a long time and so have many of their viewers.

"Game shows generally have an older audience than other types of programs," said Neil Kuvin, general manager of WPTF-TV (Channel 28). "Advertisers would rather stick with the younger viewers because that's where the money is."