

# Jackie Gleason's Brooklyn

What's happened to the Brooklyn of Jackie Gleason's "The Honey-mooners"? According to a New York Forum essay, Brooklyn, the borough of neighborhoods, has passed into history. Take a bit-sweet look at Brooklyn as it was then and as it is today, tomorrow in the Opinion pages.



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## NEW YORK FORUM

### ABOUT PEOPLE

# A Honeymoon That Lasted

By Jim Sleeper

**J**ACKIE GLEASON was but one of the children of the streets and pool halls and dismal tenement flats of this city who left to follow their stars, sometimes to become stars themselves.

But Gleason gave the old familiar passion play a twist. He brought his neighborhood along with him and gave it to the world. The world laughed until it cried, and not only because one out of eight Americans can trace family roots to Brooklyn.

With Gleason's passing, something we all could love in the old, white ethnic working-class culture

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that incubated Al Smith, the New Deal, the 1939 World's Fair, Fiorello LaGuardia and the Dodgers has slipped out of the life of New York. In its place: less girth, less mirth. Less heart.

"Almost everybody was a Kramden in this neighborhood that I lived in," Gleason told CBS's Morley Safer, speaking of Bushwick and Ralph, the raging, tenderhearted bus driver he still plays in "Honeymooners" reruns every night on Channel 11. "Oh, there was a lot of affection, but the [house] was dull. The bulbs weren't very bright and the surroundings, of course, were very bare." It was a situation demanding improvisation.

Improvise they did, these Gleasons, Woody Allens, Danny Kayes, George Carlins, Henry Millers, Tony Bennetts and Barbra Streisands, the stand-up comics, artists, impresarios, athletes and lovers of society our boroughs nurtured and then dispersed around the globe. They schemed, wrote and sang their hearts out. Gleason showed us what it was about our neighborhood life that made its products what they were, even in rebellion.

It helped that Gleason was shaped like Brooklyn itself. Can one really never be too rich or too thin? Ralph, Joe the Bartender and the Poor Soul were hard up, fat, uncool, earnest almost unto desperation. They weren't beautiful people, or even pretty,

but — to use Gleason's word for his sidekick, Art Carney — they could be "gorgeous."

And faithful. Ralph fretted that he was unworthy of Alice — "The mere thought of another man lookin' at you drives me nuts" — and all his conning was only to make her happy. "The Honey-mooners" never tackled "sexism" or "racism" directly, but you knew where Ralph's heart was, and some episodes ended with little lessons in a proto-feminism more genuine than what many pretend to today.



The Great One

Gleason boozed and brawled, but he never forgot the old parish sense of right and wrong: Even in later years, this reviler of television evangelists dreaded not making it to heaven.

"Who wants to go to hell? I would certainly love to speak to God," he told Safer. "That would be the greatest thing that could possibly happen to anyone."

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Safer: "What would you say to Him?"

Gleason: "I'd faint."

If not God, then the postwar culture of upward mobility ordained that places like Bushwick, where teenage boys crooned in four-part harmony under streetlamps on warm summer nights, were to be left behind. Long before the first abandoned building forced old-timers to avert their gazes in a flicker of befuddlement and hurt, they knew the stigma of decay.

Those who stayed visit the relatives out on the Island on a Sunday, and are treated to the subtlest of suburban condescensions; then they drive home to these buckling pavements and stale flats, and some of them feel ashamed. Ralph's garrulous "Big Mouth" has fallen silent before Archie Bunker's barbed defiance of diminished horizons.

Even Archie is in reruns now, and it's hard to imagine him or Ralph really at home in a neighborhood that would make a hero of Bernhard Goetz. It will be the city's new peoples and cultures who capture the world's imagination, though perhaps they would be stronger for appreciating the best of what preceded them.

Meanwhile, there are other places: Gleason took Bushwick to Miami, where half of "his" Brooklyn went. "Haahh *Sweet it Is!*" drawled Florida's former governor last year on the night he defeated a conservative Republican to become a senator of the New South.

A small legacy from The Great One and the neighborhoods he loved and couldn't forget.