

Imagining the Future into Reality: An Interdisciplinary Exploration of *The Jetsons*

by  
Jane Elizabeth Myrick

A THESIS

submitted to  
Oregon State University  
Honors College

in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the  
degree of

Honors Baccalaureate of Arts in English  
(Honors Scholar)

Honors Baccalaureate of Arts in Education  
(Honors Scholar)

Presented April 30, 2019  
Commencement June 2020



## AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Jane Elizabeth Myrick for the degree of Honors Baccalaureate of Arts in English and Honors Baccalaureate of Arts in Education presented on April 30, 2019. Title: Imagining the Future into Reality: An Interdisciplinary Exploration of *The Jetsons*.

Abstract approved: \_\_\_\_\_

Eric Hill

This investigation examines *The Jetsons*' vision of the future and tracks to what extent the content of the show is relevant to the modern era, both technologically and socially. Much of the dazzling technology in the show feels familiar, and most of it is either already available or is in development, so the innovations of the present are largely keeping pace with the show's vision. Culturally, the show reflects the values of the era in which it was created (in the 1960s), and despite the show's somewhat dated outlook on culture and society, we can still empathize and see our own modern experiences reflected back at us through an animated futuristic lens. Therefore, *The Jetsons* serves as a touchstone for our hopes for the future as well as the experiences of the past and the values and goals of the present.

Key Words: The Jetsons, Future, Technology, Culture, History, Television, Cartoon

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Jane Elizabeth Myrick, Author

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**Introduction:**

Few facets of human life are as alluring as the narcotic effects of nostalgia. Whether innovators imagining their creations into reality or politicians harkening back to a vague period of a country's greatness to bolster their platform's following, nostalgia for the halcyon past and idyllic future is omnipresent in society like a divine entity treated with dutiful reverence. Imagining the future is a particularly potent kind of nostalgia (Green 54) because it is founded upon fond memories from the past and infused with our present wishes, desires, and aspirations. In short, the future is the temporal embodiment of hope. The future represents an alternative to current reality that is bursting with opportunity, making it the ultimate platform for creativity. The visions of the future crafted by multiple generations of Americans were inspired by the world of the loveable and comical Jetson family in the animated television sitcom *The Jetsons*.



**Fig. 1.** The Jetsons are the epitome of the nuclear family: a father, mother, and their socially-recognized children (Encyclopedia Britannica).

**Background:**

In 1937, William “Bill” Hanna and Joseph “Joe” Barbera (Fig. 2) met in Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studio’s newly-minted Cartoon Department in Hollywood. Twenty years and innumerable hit cartoon collaborations later, the pair established their own studio, Hanna-Barbera Productions, Inc. This cartoon powerhouse went on to dominate televised animation from its founding in 1957 (Sennett) until it merged with Warner Bros. Studios in 2001 (Natale and Schneider). Jokingly referred to as the General Motors of the cartoon industry, the influence of Hanna-Barbera’s cartoons is readily found in modern popular culture: children’s vitamins come in the shape of Fred Flintstone’s head, and the creation of Scooby-Doo TV series, books, and movies is ongoing (Norman Rockwell Museum).



**Fig. 2.** Bill Barbera (left) and Joe Hanna (right) pose with some of their most iconic characters for an exhibit at the Norman Rockwell Museum (from left to right: Yogi Bear, Scooby-Doo, Fred Flintstone, Bamm-Bamm Rubble, Pebbles Flintstone, Huckleberry Hound, and George Jetson).

Hanna-Barbera Productions, Inc. (hereafter referred to as Hanna-Barbera) was the creative force behind *The Jetsons* for its original three seasons broadcast on television. *The Jetsons'* influential original 24 episodes aired between September 23, 1962 and March 17, 1963 during prime time, directly competing with two other existing popular shows: *Walt Disney's Wonderful World of Color* and *Dennis the Menace* (Sennett 110). Because of the divided audience, *The Jetsons* was less successful than Hanna and Barbera had hoped—Barbera commented, “We were perplexed and disappointed that it didn’t do better in the ratings” (Sennett 110). After the season ended, the show was relegated to the re-run time slot on Saturday mornings, where, “...the reception by young audiences was hugely favorable” (Sennett 110). A sudden, unexpected resurgence in popularity in the 1980s led to the creation of two additional seasons between 1985 and 1987 (Novak). This rise is largely attributed to an overall increase in popularity of color TVs during this time, since *The Jetsons* was the first ever animated program designed to be broadcast in vibrant hues, even though less than 3% of American households owned a color television set when the series originally aired in 1962 (Novak).

Despite being less visually appealing than intended, the hilarity permeating *The Jetsons'* plot lines offered more than enough in compensation. Set 100 years into the future (approximately 2062), the premise of the cartoon sitcom was based on the antics of George Jetson and his family following a similar formula as Hanna-Barbera’s Stone-Age cartoon, *The Flintstones*. According to Barbera, the translation of a typical suburban family from the Stone Age into the future, “...seemed like a natural evolution” (Sennett 102). While both programs found their inspiration in classic 1950s programs such as Jackie Gleason’s *The Honeymooners* (Natale and Schneider), the latter did not have

nearly as significant an impact as *The Jetsons*, which immediately garnered a cult following. This fan base still thrives today as re-runs of the now-classic *Jetsons* episodes continue to air on channels such as Cartoon Network's Boomerang (Frank), delighting children of younger generations just as they did decades ago. *The Jetsons* is referred to in passing in news articles, podcasts, and literature; the show is a touchstone for both the current technology boom as well as classic Americana. This lasting integration into society begs the question: can a 60+ year-old children's cartoon still be relevant?

At first glance, it is easy to dismiss *The Jetsons* as an antiquated—albeit entertaining—relic from generations past. Those who argue the show no longer plays a significant role in American cultural discourse cite the then-dazzling technology as a primary factor that dates the show. After all, technology is only new if you remember the way the world was before the creation of that technology (Dorsey); a child born in the early 2000s likely will not remember an era before Skype or Facetime, and subsequently, the use of video calling present in *The Jetsons* will not have nearly the same awe-inspiring impact as it did on children watching the show in the 1960s, when telephones were still tethered to walls and decidedly screen-less.

Yet the striking resemblance between *The Jetsons'* technology and current devices (both those available to the average American consumer and those in development) cannot be dismissed. If anything, the similarities between on- and off-screen life serve to accentuate the surprising connection between the Jetsons' world and ours. Additionally, some claim the social dynamic among the show's characters is archaic and no longer applicable in contemporary American society. However, the show provides a fascinating platform for worldwide conversations to this day. Consequently, *The*

*Jetsons* has remained influential through its iconic technology, and it has simultaneously become a vessel through which broader human experiences can be viewed in 25 minute-segments.

### **Methods:**

A variety of sources must be utilized to study the extent to which *The Jetsons* can be understood as a cultural pillar that has withstood the test of time. These resources include—but are not limited to—the extensive research conducted by paleo-futurist Matt Novak for the Smithsonian Museum, reputable media outlets such as *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *Business Insider*, as well as the anthological reader *Gender, Race, and Class in Media* edited by Gail Dines and Jean M. Humez, and Karen Sternheimer's book, *It's Not the Media: The Truth About Pop Culture's Influence on Children*. Based on these works, the significant prevalence of Jetsonian technological and social developments present today demonstrates that while many aspects of American life have certainly made significant progress since the creation of *The Jetsons*, the show remains profoundly relevant to the American experience.

### **Technology:**

Perhaps the most obvious, eye-catching distinction between the world in which children were growing up in the 1960s and the world being explored on their television sets was the awe-inspiring gadgetry integrated into the Jetson's household. To a child sitting cross-legged before their television set, the sleek design of George's foldable flying car and his apartment's Googie architecture (Fig. 3) would have been astounding (Novak). Obviously, those children realized the fictional nature of the show, but they

were intrigued. There were clear connections between George's everyday life and their own; in an age where TVs were rolled into classrooms to allow students to watch John Glenn's orbit of Earth in *Friendship 7*, George's jet-fueled world seemed like the future NASA envisioned for us all. Therefore, the creation of the remaining mystifying technology present in the show seemed not only possible, but probable. If John Glenn could orbit Earth just like George Jetson, why couldn't video calls or service robots become the norm?



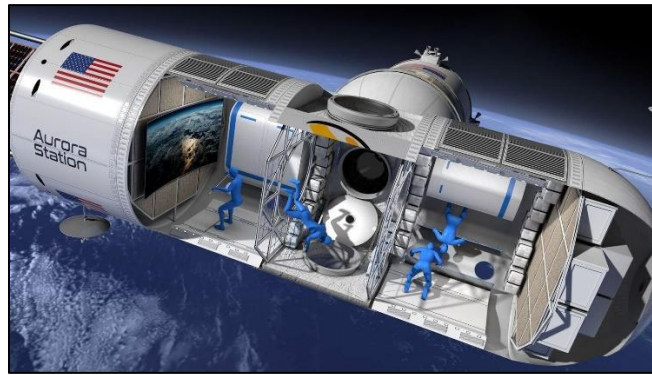
**Fig. 3.** Googie architecture is a type of futurist architecture influenced by jet culture and the atomic age characterized by dramatic yet organic and elegant angles, the dynamic interplay of glass and concrete, and platforms that seem to defy gravity. Completed in 1961, the Theme Building at the Los Angeles International Airport is an example of this architectural style.

Beginning with the show's iconic title sequence, viewers are aware of *The Jetsons'* advanced gadgetry. Each episode introduces new, groundbreaking technology, but it is always treated as though these inventions are the norm: flying cars, video calling, service robots, smart homes, and treadmills (even for dogs) are common, not novelties.

For the purpose of this investigation, fashion and architecture are also discussed as facets of Jetsonian innovation due to their close connection with technological advancement.

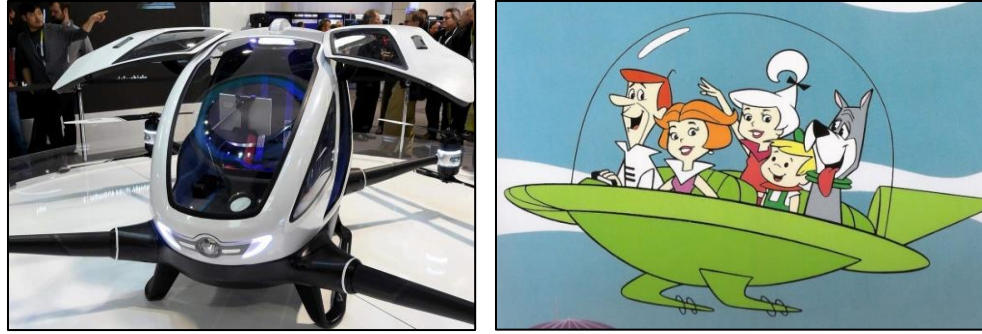
While modernity is not moved by flying cars akin to the bubble-like models presented throughout *The Jetsons*, vehicles capable of casual flight are certainly readily found in modern cinema as well as in current development. One only has to look as far as the motion picture box office to find a plethora of speculative fiction films preoccupied with space travel that have debuted in recent years: Christopher Nolan's *Interstellar* (2014), Ridley Scott's *The Martian* (2015), Morten Tyldum's *Passengers* (2016), not to mention the entire *Star Trek* franchise (both the original television series and films as well as the 21<sup>st</sup>-century film reboots). Just as *The Jetsons* captivated viewers 60 years ago, so too does modernity have a piqued interest in exploring our solar system and beyond. The fascination with space exploration has also inspired those with the financial means to implement such interests off the silver screen. SpaceX CEO Elon Musk has built his career around forward-thinking inventions such as electric cars, and he has begun to look toward privatized space travel analogous to what is readily accessible by the Jetsons (Ewalt). The Jetsons' vacation to other planets may soon become a reality as Musk works toward constructing a habitable community on Mars by 2024 (Mosher). Musk's vision is certainly ambitious, but it is also a long way out—it will likely take decades to simply develop a ship capable of casual space flight, not to mention establishing destinations on other planets or even in outer orbit. His first clients will have to pay an exorbitant sum for such an experience, so it will take even longer for Musk's space travel to be available to a broader range of people. Potential outlets for ordinary citizen space travel are also expanding in number, with low orbit flights being the latest

dream destination. On April 6<sup>th</sup>, 2018, the U.S.-based space travel company Orion Span unveiled plans for a luxury hotel housed in a satellite (Fig. 4) that tourists could visit beginning in 2022 (Katz).



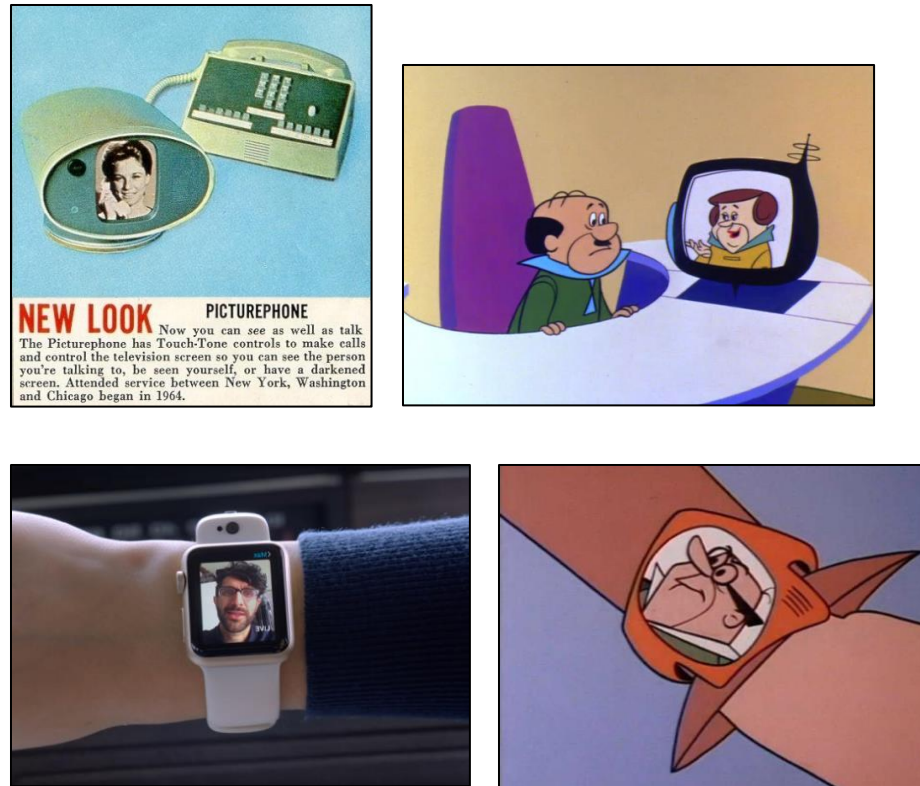
**Fig. 4.** At just \$9.5 million dollars for 12 days of orbiting hundreds of miles above the Earth's surface, Orion Span's Aurora Station hotel is one of the cheapest space travel options currently in the works.

There is a technology similar to the flying cars in *The Jetsons* that has been on the rise for years: drones. At a global level, the presence of drones has expanded into niches ranging from special drone-building clubs on college campuses to soaring above city streets taking photos for real estate listings. Dubai has taken the concept of drone flights to a new level: beginning in July of 2017, citizens of the opulent city have had the option to fly in drones on their daily errands (Goldman), and the drones in use in Dubai bear a significant resemblance to the flying pods used in *The Jetsons* (Fig. 5). These initial steps toward the integration of drones and other forms of flight-based vehicles into everyday life will be a historic modernization and will demonstrate the increasing diversity of sky-high transport.



**Fig. 5.** Note the similarities in design between the Jetsons' family car and the Dubai drones: rounded body shape, large glass windows, etc.

The most obvious example of Jetsonian technology permeating modern life is videotelephony. While household phones of the 1960s remained firmly tethered to walls, the Jetsons' world featured phones that were not only mobile, but also capable of providing face-to-face interaction. The characters in the show repeatedly call one another, appearing on screens throughout their homes and workplaces, and even on watches. The first commercial device designed for video calling available in the real world was the Picturephone Mod I (Fig. 6), created by Bell Labs for display at the 1964 New York World's Fair and Disneyland ("History of Videotelephony"), although by no means was its usage widespread. In fact, the cost to operate the Picturephone Mod I was about \$1,000 per month (adjusted for inflation), so the devices quickly fell out of favor ("History of Videotelephony").



**Fig. 6.** This Picturephone Mod I (top left) bears a certain resemblance to the video phones (top right) used throughout *The Jetsons*. Similarly, the Apple Watch with an accompanying camera-enabled band (bottom left) is uncannily similar in both design and function to the watches relied upon by *The Jetsons* characters.

The concept of video calling remained imprinted in the minds of entrepreneur's however, and since the mid-2000s, video calling has been normalized through the creation of services such as Skype, Google Hangouts, and FaceTime. The latter has also been integrated with the Apple Watch, which is extremely similar to watches used by multiple characters on *The Jetsons* (Fig. 6). Video telephone technology has evolved to take on a similar role in modern life as it was imagined in *The Jetsons*.

The very first episode in *The Jetsons* follows the Jetson family as they shop for a new robot maid to assist with housework, ultimately choosing the slightly outdated but

sharp-witted Rosie. Aside from Rosie, a variety of other robots lacking Artificial Intelligence also appear throughout the show, including shoebox-sized independent vacuum bots serving as a source of rudimentary comedy (Novak). In the modern world, AIs such as Apple's *Siri*, Amazon's *Alexa*, and Microsoft's *Cortana* have been known to commit Rosie-esque acts of mischief, including ordering a dollhouse and four pounds of sugar cookie dough at the innocent request of a child on TV (Liptak). Additionally, autonomous cleaning machines such as the iRobot *Roomba* line are becoming more and more commonplace as they glide under couches and desks across the country in an effort to rid the surface of dirt, dust, and errant pet hairs. Beyond the field of household tasks, robots are taking on increasingly more human roles in current society: two primary examples of this are in real estate and as care providers.

Traditionally, looking for a home has typically involved the use of a real estate agent's services – potential buyers discuss their preferred price ranges, location preferences, and amenities, and the realtor then takes potential buyers on tours of homes. At some property management companies such as Zenplace and real estate offices such as REX Real Estate, the process has been changed—with the goal of increasing efficiency—via the introduction of robots (McLaughlin). The robots resemble music stands, with small wheels lining the base and a touchscreen display where sheet music would rest. These robots are remote-controlled, operated by workers offsite. Using cameras and microphones, buyers can ask the robot questions about the house (the REX bot is programmed to answer 75 common questions) or speak directly with a representative of the office selling the house (McLaughlin).

Another field of increasing robot usage is in health care, particularly caring for the elderly. One robot model at the forefront of the robotic health care movement is RUDY (Fig. 7), a human-like robot created by Anthony Nunez (Carey). Nunez is the founder and CEO of INF Robotics, a start-up based in Northern Virginia. He created RUDY with the goal of allowing seniors to retain their independence after witnessing his own grandmother's deterioration following a fall that left her dependent on a caregiver. With features such as a video chat interface and remote steering (both of which allow caregivers, family members, or medics to check-in with the patient) and the ability to respond to questions or tell jokes (Carey), robots like RUDY are set to become more popular in the coming years, especially with the aging Baby Boomer generation and the associated rise in demand for caregivers.



**Fig. 7.** RUDY (left) and Rosie (right).

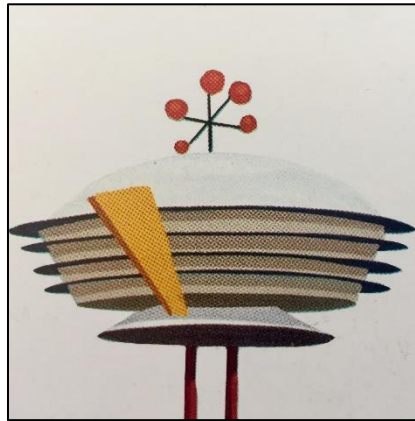
Beyond the gadgets used by *The Jetsons* characters, the modern world contains close parallels to the building styles seen in *The Jetsons*, as well as the very clothes the characters wear. Counter culture movements are often imbued with revitalizations of decades-old trends: retro is in vogue and being upcycled with modern twists. The current

neo-classical Americana in many ways resembles the kairos of the 1960s, including the era's signature architecture and distinct fashions.

As cities become ever more urbanized, the demand for distinct residential and business sectors intensifies. Skyscrapers across the globe have increased in magnitude, like stalagmites creeping incrementally upwards; a growing number of skyscrapers are piercing the clouds just like the Jetsons' apartment (Fig. 8). Throughout *The Jetsons*, all buildings are shown high in the sky, anchored to the ground by massive pillars. The show uses the aforementioned Googie architectural style almost exclusively, in part because it is ready-made for a cartoon world—the bright colors, curved lines, and interesting structural choices all lend well to capturing the viewer's attention—but also because it was, in some respects, a genuine reflection of the defining aesthetic of the era. The 1960s were the atomic age; people in the United States were elated by the possibility (if not probability) of cheap nuclear energy, eagerly blasting off toward the innovation-filled future.

This enthusiasm for the future carried over into other aspects of American life in the 1960s, particularly architecture. A hitherto undefined design style that began to manifest after the conclusion of World War II suddenly became coherent: Googie (Novak). The 1964 World's Fair in New York prominently featured Googie buildings, as did the 1962 World's Fair in Seattle, including the prototypically-Googie Space Needle. Walt Disney—one of Hanna-Barbera's top rivals—even incorporated Googie architecture into his Tomorrowland region of Disneyland. Many Googie buildings from this era still exist today, and it has a lasting influence in media, including being the inspiration for the home of the Parr family in the movie *The Incredibles* (Edelson).

Perhaps the most important facet of Googie architecture (and the tech-savvy future it implied) was it was meant to be accessible to everyone: gas stations, cafes, motels, and even banks were designed with ultramodern twists. It was a sign of the times – the sleek modernity being imagined into reality was for everyone to enjoy, not just those who could afford to buy the gleaming gadgets rolling off assembly lines.



**Fig. 8.** This preliminary mock-up of the Jetsons' Skypad Apartments is an excellent example of Googie architecture as applied to a skyscraper. Note the interesting geometric layering and the atomic-esque antenna atop the roof.

The fashion industry is often cyclical: designers reflect upon the past and incorporate it into the present. More and more contemporary fashion designers are being inspired by the iconic looks of the 1960s—this was a decade that debuted the mini skirt, oversized coats, and knee-high boots, all of which were worn by characters in *The Jetsons*. There has recently been a definite resurgence of mod subculture, a defining aspect of 1960s fashion, with designers imbuing their clothing with the geometrically avant-garde styles worn by the iconic 1960s fashion model Twiggy and space-age planetary prints. Dior designer Maria Grazia Chiuri drew upon the 1960s as inspiration for her Fall 2018 runway show, “...turning back time half a century” (Fisher). Using

similar silhouettes as 1960s markers such as oversized sunglasses, wide belts, and bell-like miniskirts, Chiuri invoked the spirit of the decade that was so prevalent in *The Jetsons*; it would be easy to translate the animated fashion of Jane or Judy Jetson onto a model for Chiuri's show. George Jetson's iconic white boots have also come into fashion several times since the show's debut: first in other films such as Robert Zemeckis' film *Back to the Future II* (1989), and later in athleisure wear, including Nike's official remake of Marty McFly's shoes from that film (Fig. 9).



**Fig. 9.** George Jetson's white futuristic sneakers (left) inspired generations of shoe designs, including the 2015 Atlas 2 (middle) by the contemporary LA-based company Vlado Footwear, as well as Marty McFly's self-lacing Nikes in *Back to the Future II*, which Nike later made a reality in the form of the 2016 Nike Mag (right).

The Jetsonian space-age trend was also prominently displayed at the January 2017 New York Fashion Week, during which Bill Nye (of 'Bill Nye the Science Guy' notoriety) and Buzz Aldrin (the famous NASA astronaut) walked the runway for Nick Graham's "Life on Mars: Fall-Winter 2035"-themed collection (Fig. 10), wherein Nye sported his signature bow tie with a metallic grey, spaceship-patterned suit and Aldrin did

the moonwalk while wearing a black shirt emblazoned with a graphic of Mars, black pants, and a shining silver bomber jacket (Schnurr).



**Fig. 10.** Nye and Aldrin take to the runway for the January 2017 New York Fashion Week.

### **Culture:**

Just as viewers are immediately introduced to the technological dimension of *The Jetsons* through its theme song, so too are they presented with the characters comprising the family social dynamic integral to the show. This subtler facet of the series is frequently cited as the foundational argument against the valid comparison of the show to a modern setting (Novak). While it is clear from the onset that George Jetson's white, lower-middle class, nuclear family is far from diverse or progressive, the social themes that manifest throughout the show have remained subjects of national and international dialogue well into the modern era. Falling under the broader concept of 1960s conservatism (Bloom), these themes include gender and racial inequality, educational values, employee confidence, and environmental policies (Usborne).

It can be readily understood that *The Jetsons* took a fairly typical approach to its portrayal of Jane, Judy—Jane and George’s teenage daughter—or the other female characters. Women in the series are secretaries, wives, daughters, or, as in Rosie’s case, servants (Usborne): satellites of other male characters. This is even true in the theme song itself (for the complete lyrics, see Appendix), wherein Jane and Judy are referred to as ‘wife’ and ‘daughter’—words describing their relation to the patriarch, George—while Elroy is referred to as what he is: a ‘boy’. Note the word ‘son’ would also be contextually applicable and fit into the rhythm of the song just as well as ‘boy’ does (“*The Jetsons*”). Additionally, Jane is often the subject of comedy, such as when many jokes are made at her expense while she is learning to drive. She is usually portrayed as being less in touch with the world than George, since she is a stay-at-home mother throughout the series. However, she is notably cleverer than George, tricking him into giving her money to shop during the title sequence and, in one episode, inadvertently assisting in the arrest of a notorious criminal while learning to drive (“*The Jetsons*”), although in these moments she is still an object of frustration to George.

Judy Jetson is similarly a point of exasperation for George; he is a very doting father and treats Judy protectively, although compared to Jane, Judy is shown as being very capable and social without seeming shallow. The second episode of the series, “A Date with Jet Screamer,” focuses on Judy as the vision of a typical, fun-loving teenage girl projected into the future and her father’s schemes to keep her away from “sex, drugs, and rock-n-roll” hedonism (although, because it’s a family show, it’s more like “a date, a brief appearance of a cigarette, and rock-n-roll”). In the episode, Judy enters a song, “Eep

Opp Ork Ah Ah” (Fig. 11.), into a contest in the hopes of winning the prize of a date with her music idol, rock star Jet Screamer.



**Fig. 11.** Left: promotional material for the Jet Screamer episode showing Judy admiring the rock star while George looks less-than-pleased. Right: the song around which the episode is based, “Eep Opp Ork Ah Ah” was so catchy Hanna-Barbera studios released a 45-rpm record with the song (the title misspelled as “Oop”) and *The Jetsons*’ title track.

Jet Screamer is an amalgamation of the teen pop idols of the 1950s and 1960s, such as Elvis Presley, the Beatles, and Ricky Nelson (Novak). Judy, in turn, is a reflection of the adoring—bordering on obsessive—fans of these stars. This star-fan relationship has echoed across the decades, as thousands of teenage fans from around the world pack into stadiums to see contemporary stars such as Ed Sheeran, Khalid, and the Jonas Brothers perform. Even Judy and Jet’s date remains relatable: the pair dine at a burger joint (although this one is in outer space and is a “fly-in” instead of a “drive-in”), visit the Fun Pad amusement park (similar to Disneyland, which had just opened in 1955) and dance “the solar swivel” (a parody of the twist). Judy is surprisingly ahead of her time and

frequently admonishes George's old-school ways of thinking with a knowing, "Oh, Daddy!": she represents a new generation ripe with new ways of thinking.

It is important to understand *The Jetsons* was created at a fascinating point in the history of women's rights: the 1960s saw the start of the era of second-wave feminism (Burkett), so the nuances of how Jane and Judy are portrayed show a distinct intersection of the newer ideas about gender equality and the traditional values of the era, which were in turn based on even earlier perceptions of women's roles in society. In the modern era, women's rights are human rights (Clinton). Vast progress has been made to promote gender equality in Western culture and around the world, and women are feeling increasingly confident in their ability to stand up for themselves, as evident by the #MeToo movement, which arguably started during the 1960s (Hemmer). Women's rights issues remain poignant and prominent in both the United States as well as on a global scale: the moments of negative treatment of women in *The Jetsons* resonates with the struggles still faced by minority groups across socioeconomic and political borders, ranging from the unfair treatment experienced by Muslim and Mexican immigrants (Katirai and Puig) to the prejudice against Syrian refugees in the European Union (Laila). Because of this, *The Jetsons* is still a touchstone for understanding the roles women have historically played in American society, and it can also be expanded to symbolize the progress that has been made.

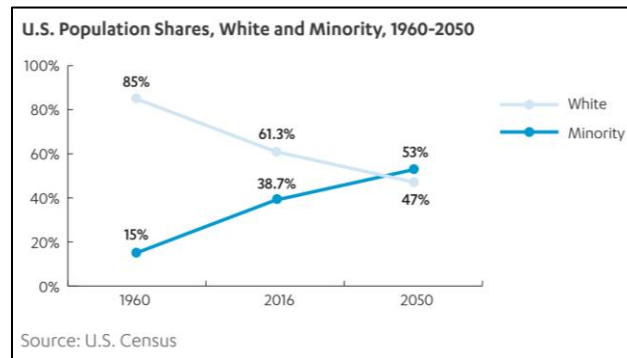
A primary source of criticism from modern viewers of *The Jetsons* is the perplexing lack of racial diversity; it is exceedingly challenging to find an animated face that is not peachy-white anywhere in the show, even in crowd scenes. The only divergence from this skin tone is found in robot characters such as Rosie, the Jetsons'

maid, who is metallic grey. But this doesn't necessarily mean the writers and animators of the show were racist. They were mirroring the racial paradigms of the era, wherein "...black people [and other minority groups] were systematically excluded from the postwar institutions that allowed many other white families (like our fictional Jetsons) to achieve that American Dream" (Novak).

*The Jetsons* was fundamentally a children's show, and it was not intended to promote any sort of racial commentary about life in the 1960s. Instead, it is a hopeful story looking toward a better future while relying on the existing societal narratives of the era in which it was originally created. *The Jetsons* also provides an interesting catalyst for conversations about the extent to which the U.S. has or has not changed its attitudes towards race in the last half century.

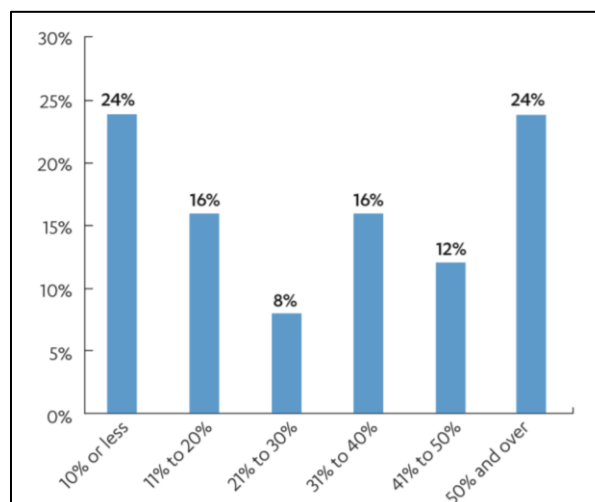
The good news is that there has been positive progress around racial equality: there have been far more discussions addressing race, including how race is represented in media, raising questions such as how we as a society should recognize the lasting impacts of racism still manifest in today's culture, and how can we most successfully mitigate those effects. This shift in attitudes is reflected in statistics as well: from the early 1960s into the early 1970s, there were few programs on television featuring actors of color—only about 6% of characters in TV comedies and dramas were played by black Americans, despite comprising 11% of the US population (Isaacs 159). In 1980, 8% of characters were played by black Americans, who represented 12% of the US population (Isaacs 159). By 1993, however, black characters represented 11% of characters on television and black Americans made up 12% of the population (Isaacs 159). Although the pace of this change was slow, the overall impact was significant because it laid the

groundwork for more diversity and representation in contemporary media, especially as the US population becomes more and more diverse (Fig. 12).



**Fig. 12.** The US Census' expected population trends from 1960 to 2050. Note the expected majority-minority population share of 2050.

For the 2017-2018 television season, 28% of lead actors for new scripted shows that debuted across all platforms were people of color, which is significantly higher than the 2015-2016 season (Hunt 2). Additionally, 24% of new shows debuting across all platforms featured a majority-minority cast (Fig. 13.), which is a massive change from television in the era of *The Jetsons*, where minority characters were far less common (Hunt 72).



**Fig. 13.** Distribution of minority cast share of new scripted television shows for the 2017-2018 television season (including streaming services).

Another area in which *The Jetsons* is still relevant is the field of education. Since the 1940s, public schools have largely used William Bagley's theory of education: essentialism. This theory was formed and implemented in response to the perennialism model of the 1920s and 30s. Essentialism focuses on the systematic and disciplined dissipation of a rigorous core curriculum comprised of vital knowledge and skills (Cohen). The launching of Sputnik in 1957 was a catalyst for many educational reforms; essentialism was thought to be the best way the U.S. could compete academically at an international scale, particularly against the Cold War powerhouses of the Soviet Union and China (Powell). Consequently, there was a frenzied effort to increase math and science education in the early 1960s, a movement clearly seen today in Common Core State Standards and the push for STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) education.

The essentialism model is also present in *The Jetsons*. Elroy Jetson (George and Jane's primary school-aged son) is academically advanced for his age, even within the bounds of the Jetsonian school system. He receives straight A's in subjects such as 'elementary electronics' and 'advanced finger painting', although it is made clear by his interactions with his family and peers that he feels pressure to succeed in school ("The Jetsons" Episode 24). This is a legacy that students around the world today are living with as well: there is an increasing perceived necessity for students to compete against their peers for acceptance into post-secondary educational institutions and the workforce. In contemporary schools, this typically means taking Advanced Placement or

International Baccalaureate classes, which “...give high school students an opportunity to pursue college-level studies while still in high school” (U.S. Department of State), as well as scoring well on standardized tests such as the Scholastic Achievement Test (SAT) or American College Testing (ACT), in addition to partaking in extracurricular activities such as volunteer work, theater, music, and athletics.

All of the aforementioned academically-accelerated programs are becoming increasingly available to students across the country, which is something of a double-edged sword. On one hand, the increased accessibility of these programs suggests more students can take more rigorous classes and be intellectually stimulated starting from younger ages, thereby increasing the overall intellectual aptitude with each successive cohort of students. Conversely, it also suggests more students have the ability to achieve what had previously been more difficult to achieve, thereby necessitating another raise in standards. If more students are receiving AP credit, for example, those credits are less relevant to college applications because they are not as unique as they once were. The pressure to achieve has driven some parents from even wealthy families to use morally questionable tactics to get their children admitted to prestigious institutions, such as the parents accused in early 2019 of bribing athletic recruiters to put their students on school rosters, obtaining false diagnoses of learning disabilities from complicit medical professionals, and paying off standardized exam proctors to change students’ responses to guarantee certain scores (Medina). Academic rigor and the need for raised performance standards present in *The Jetsons* are certainly present today, if only at the early stages.

Just as a significant portion of modern life revolves around work, a large part of *The Jetsons* follows George at his place of employment, Spacely Space Sprockets (Fig.

14). Since 1946, domestic sitcoms have largely followed similar formulas. Traditionally, the patriarch of middle-class families on television shows were the epitome of stability, the pinnacle of wisdom, and a source of sophisticated humor, making the children and their antics the driving force of the plot (e.g. *The Brady Bunch*). Meanwhile, working class families on television shows featured a ‘blue-collar buffoon’ as a patriarch that was, “...dumb, immature, irresponsible, and lacking in common sense...well intentioned, even lovable, but no one to respect or emulate,” (Butsch 101).

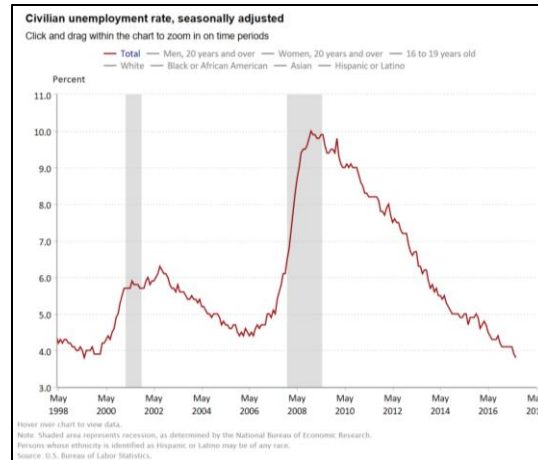


**Fig. 14.** George Jetson is admonished constantly at work by his ill-tempered boss, Mr. Spacely.

George Jetson does not fill either of these roles in their entirety, but he gravitates toward buffoonery. The predominant motive for this portrayal stemmed from the labor shortages and ensuing employee unrest wracking the U.S. economy following the Great Depression and through World War II. The buffoon archetype was formed to alleviate the negative feelings of labor union workers by satirizing their apparent job instability (Butsch 107); this is exemplified by George Jetson being cyclically shuffled among the ranks within Spacely’s company, a running joke present throughout the series. For blue-collar and

middle-class men, being able to watch with their children as George fails spectacularly at work (despite his simple job of pushing buttons), get fired, re-hired, promoted to Vice President, and demoted back to his original role helps assuage their fears about their own employment status (Usborne). Although George is a figment of Hanna-Barbera Studios, it is easy to empathize with his cause, and seeing his continual re-employment—even after some hilariously idiotic mistakes—is comforting.

George's character archetype was not new: Willy Loman, the protagonist of Arthur Miller's 1949 play, *Death of a Salesman*, endures similar trials and tribulations through his line of work. This theme of work conflict is one that echoes across time. Job stability, particularly among today's union-based working-people such as coal miners, steel workers, auto workers, and agriculture-based businessmen, remains a highly pertinent subject as current workers' rights struggles have become intimately intertwined with larger political movements, as well as with concerns regarding robots (not unlike RUDY or Rosie) being assigned to what were previously human tasks. Ultimately, though, the current U.S. unemployment rate is hovering at about 4.4% (Fig. 15), which is among the lowest rates it has been since World War II, when it was at a record low of 1.2% in 1944 (Amadeo).



**Fig. 15.** The graph shows unemployment has been on a fairly steady decline since the 2008 recession and is significantly lower than the 6.0% unemployment rate of 1962 (Amadeo), the year *The Jetsons* was released.

Another social theme in *The Jetsons* of equal importance in modern society, particularly with reference to the future of modern society, is environmental policy. The state of Earth's environment is never explicitly described at any point during the series, however, in the Jetsons/Flintstones cross-over TV movie, *The Jetsons Meet the Flintstones*, after the Jetsons have traveled back in time to the Flintstonian age, Elroy and George have a brief exchange about the grass in Fred Flintstone's neighborhood (Novak). George describes grass as being something he recalls from 'ancient history'. His comment implies grass, a robust species of plant, no longer grows on Earth's surface. In the 1980s film version of *The Jetsons*, Rosie extends the pillar upon which the Jetson's apartment is built, increasing the elevation to raise their home out of a blanket of smog covering Orbit City. Additionally, there is a brief moment in one episode where a bird is shown walking on a sidewalk (it is unclear whether the bird is at ground level or if it is on another sky platform) and it suddenly turns and addresses the audience directly, saying

that there is too much air traffic for birds to fly safely. Based on these understated clues, it has been speculated the Jetsonian future is not a utopia as it is portrayed (Novak). Instead, the astounding technological advancement in *The Jetsons'* futuristic society could have been a necessary response following Earth's loss of habitable terrain.

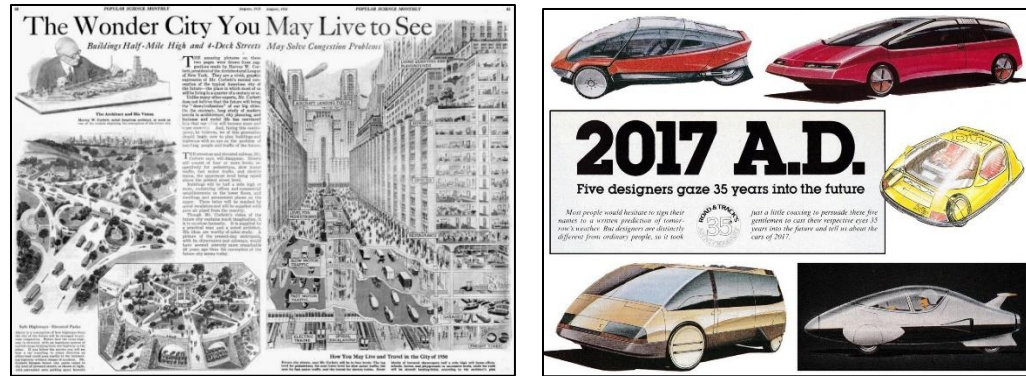
Historically, in the absence of environmental regulations, the chief byproduct of industry was—and remains—smog, which has led to innumerable medical problems like asthma, genetic changes (Tozer), and at a more superficial level, a loss of aesthetic value as the skies cloud over with gaseous colloidal murk. Smog has run rampant in cities such as London during the Industrial Revolution, Fitzgerald-era New York City, and during the 2008 Olympics in Beijing (Healy). Now, perhaps more than ever in history, comprehensive, well thought-out, and forward-thinking environmental policy is crucial for the trajectory of the human race. And yet the current political climate is recognizably shifting away from one prioritizing environmental protection. As national institutions such as the Environmental Protection Agency (which was created in 1970 in response to increasing concern over pollution and land use) are being distrusted, discredited, dismantled, and deregulated by certain sects of the government, the measures carefully cultivated to preserve the integrity of the global ecosystem are in danger of being greatly reduced or eradicated altogether.

There is, however, hope for a more environmentally safe and secure future. More and more citizens recognize the existence of, and the necessity for, adapting to climate change; this is progress from where we were a decade ago. Presidents and representatives of 336 post-secondary institutions across the nation signed the American College and University Presidents Climate Commitment (ACUPCC), promising to make their college

or university carbon-neutral by 2025 (“Institutional Carbon Neutrality”); students around the world are walking out of classes in an international effort to convince world leaders to make climate change legislation a priority (Associated Press); and zero-waste grocery stores are on the rise (Matchar). There is a bounty of evidence that humanity is capable of changing its habits for the betterment of the environment. Chief among these victories are the results of the Montreal Protocols: these regulations were implemented in 1987 to stop a hole in the ozone layer from growing, and they have been a tremendous success – according to NASA, the ozone is set to fully recover by 2060 (Reiny). In short, wither international commitment and effort, positive global environmental changes are possible.

### **Conclusion:**

Prior to and while airing *The Jetsons*, Hanna-Barbera produced a similar show, *The Flintstones*. The pre-historic series was extremely successful, as were the innumerable other ventures the cartoon powerhouse generated, so the studio was certainly not struggling financially. Why then did they produce a cartoon looking a century into the future for comedic inspiration? With both the cartoon series’ creators long dead, it is not possible to know what Hanna and Barbera’s motivations were to create *The Flintstones*’ futuristic counterpart, *The Jetsons*, however, the context of the show’s creation provides a few hints.



**Fig. 16.** The August 1925 issue of *Popular Science Monthly* magazine (left) predicted that by 1950, cities would be designed in layers to allow for maximum efficiency, complete with aircraft landing fields on the roofs of buildings. In 1982, *Road & Track* magazine asked five major car designers to imagine what vehicles would look like in 2017 (right).

A societal preoccupation with the possibilities of the future was obviously not unique to when Hanna and Barbera created *The Jetsons* (Fig. 16). However, the 1960s was a time when science fiction (hereafter referred to as sci-fi) as a genre was becoming more accepted as a legitimate literary form; previously, sci-fi was relegated to the realm of pulp magazines, and was definitely not mainstream enough to merit a prime-time slot on one of the largest television networks in existence. Authors such as Thomas Pynchon and Kurt Vonnegut were bringing visions of the future into “serious” literature and academic discourse, and the effects of this trend overflowed into other forms of media such as television and film. However, this is not to say sci-fi was a dominant genre by any means: the original *Star Trek* series—arguably the most influential sci-fi work every created—was cancelled after three seasons, despite a large group of Caltech students petitioning NBC to keep the series going (Trimble 33). *The Jetsons* was one of the first major commercial enterprises to explore the future in a way that would reach a wide

audience, which was definitely a gamble, but not without decent odds. After World War II, there was a cultural obsession with imagining answers to the question, “What next?”, a practice adopted by adults and children alike.

For the last half century, cartoons have played an integral role in child development; children are symbols of the future and the potential for tangible change, and by extension, so is the media they consume (Sternheimer 2007). Children in the 1960s were maturing in the shadow of global conflicts and crises such as the Vietnam, Korean, and Cold Wars, as opposing forces sought to persevere in the race for nuclear weaponry and space exploration. They watched rocket launches and listened to President Kennedy promise a Moon landing by the end of the 1960s. Their parents bought state-of-the-art technological marvels to use in their homes like color TVs, vacuums, electric floor polishers, and all manner of other innovative devices. In school, they listened to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s speeches about a better and brighter America based in equality for all and performed ‘duck and cover’ nuclear bomb drills. It was an era with its share of concerns, but it was also a time of profound excitement and potential.

*The Jetsons* was both entertainment as well as an inspiration for children designed to portray a future recognizably American and featuring extensions of the dazzling technology beginning to appear in storefront windows (Usborne). *The Jetsons* represented America’s idea of our historical roots as well as our future aspirations (Usborne), and it was a source of comfort in addition to hope.

What conclusions can be drawn from the influence of *The Jetsons*? What can be learned from this beloved cartoon over fifty years after its creation? I think the past matters in the present. History often exists for us in a rather monotonous format of names

and dates, but also as a set of beliefs and values. We tend to study history by examining the ways in which those beliefs and values were expressed in the past. Media is an excellent medium to use when engaging in this undertaking. Cartoons such as *The Jetsons* turn history into a narrative, and the narrative told in this animated series can provide additional historical context of the 1960s when combined with history recorded in news media, textbooks, and museums.

*The Jetsons* has very little inherent value: a generous review would call it a successfully animated story of an average (and undeniably futuristic) American family. Yet it has been collectively remembered and kept alive through nods in news stories, in re-runs, and in anecdotes passed from parents to children. *The Jetsons* is an emblem of nostalgia and functions as a touchstone for generations of Americans—it remains profoundly relevant to modernity because even with its realized dazzling technology and somewhat dated outlook on society, it is still relatable. *The Jetsons* captures the multifaceted zeitgeist of the 1960s as well as that of the current era of the early twenty-first century: we can look at *The Jetsons* and see ourselves reflected back on the screen.

### **Appendix: *The Jetsons*' Theme Song and Hoyt Curtin**

The lyrics of *The Jetsons*' theme song, written by Hanna and Barbera, are remarkably concise and merely introduce the four main characters:

Meet George Jetson;

His boy, Elroy;

Daughter Judy;

Jane, his wife. (*Metro Lyric*)

Hoyt Curtin composed the catchy theme song in 1962—it is a fun, jazzy piece with engaging instrumentation, a dense and complex texture, and a sense of timelessness. It weaves together energetic brass riffs, bouncing percussive rhythms, and a tinkling piano line. Curtin commented, “Every time I hear that damn [theme song] I’m amazed. Man, that tune swings” (Wharton).

Curtin first met Hanna and Barbera in 1957, when he was working with Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios on a beer commercial (Woo). The three men collaborated well together, and later that year, Curtin received a call from Hanna and Barbera asking Curtin to craft music to go with lyrics they had written for a new show, *Ruff and Reddy*. Curtin hung up the phone, spent five minutes creating a score, and called Hanna and Barbera back. He sang his tune to them and was met with silence. Reflecting back on the moment, Curtin revealed he had thought, “Uh-oh, I bombed out” (Woo). Instead, Hanna and Barbera offered him a recording deal. They told him they were quitting Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer to start their own cartoon studio, and they wanted to offer Curtin and his modest

company of composers, Soundtrack Music Inc., an exclusive contract to do the music for Hanna-Barbera's shows. Curtin accepted, and during his decades-long career, he wrote the songs for *The Flintstones*, *The Jetsons*, *Yogi Bear*, *Scooby-Doo*, *Huckleberry Hound*, *Johnny Quest*, and many others. For the theme songs of both *The Flintstones* and *The Jetsons*, Hanna and Barbera called Curtin with lyrics and he crafted the basic score within minutes, just as he had with *Ruff and Reddy*.

While *The Flintstones* theme was Curtin's favorite of the songs he composed, he was delighted when *The Jetsons'* theme song experienced a sudden resurgence in popularity in 1986, reaching No. 9 on Billboard's chart of top music hits. On an average day in 1986, "... [*The Jetsons'* theme song] might play between Twisted Sister and Genesis on any one of several rock 'n' roll stations in Los Angeles" (Wharton). Barbera recalled, "[Curtin]'s a brilliant musician. [*The Flintstones* and *The Jetsons*] are tunes that have been around for almost 25 years, and people are still humming them and singing them" (Wharton).

Curtin died in 2000 at age 78, leaving behind an exceptional legacy as a composer and creative force in music and entertainment.

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