

Meet Ray Romano, the man who's been sent to save the sitcom after 'Seinfeld.'

By MICHAEL GILTZ

COMEDIAN Ray Romano knows it can always get worse. His first book — *Everything and a Kite* (Bantam) — hit stores this week with a 300,000-copy first printing. "Is that what it sold?" he asked incredulously during a break from taping a new episode. When told that's just the number of copies they've shoved into stores, he seems more relaxed.

"Oh," he moans in his trademark fatalistic whine. "Well, if we sell three hundred the first week, we'll be lucky."

He relishes despairing moments with glee. When his sitcom "Everybody Loves Raymond" switched to Monday nights and scored its highest ratings yet, the cast and crew were celebrating. Queens native Romano stood in the back, saying "Don't. No. The glass is half empty."

When he was traveling on an airline and saw an episode from the first season come on, one scene in particular was so embarrassing for him ("It sucked," he laughs) that Romano ducked his head under the seat and kept asking one of the show's writers, "Is it over?"

"Stay down, Ray," the guy answered gently. "Stay down."

It's getting harder and harder for the 40-year-old Romano to stay down.

Sure, his wife and manager had to talk him into writing that book, but the reported \$2 million advance didn't hurt.

And not for nothing has his show been compared repeatedly to "Seinfeld." Like that syndication cash cow, it's wonderfully cast, with Romano as a sports-writer living in Long Island with his wife (the acerbic, deadpan Patricia Heaton) and near-invisible kids (more on that later).

Across the street are his needle-some parents (Peter Boyle and Doris Roberts) and a quietly jealous brother (Brad Garrett).

Though ignored so far by the Emmys, it has the makings of a classic. Like "The Cosby Show" in the '80s and "The Mary Tyler Moore Show" in the '70s, it is a warm, witty series for adults.

And unlike the caustic people of "Seinfeld," on Raymond the characters don't hate each other.

"We do hate each other," he insists drolly. "But with love."

Raymond began this fall with a nailbiting move to 9 p.m. on Monday, a key position on a key night for CBS that meant squaring off against Monday Night Football and Emmy-darling "Ally McBeal."

"We were very worried," says Romano. He knows that however much the critics applaud, you have to deliver an audience.

He remembers every up and down in the ratings, quoting his premiere numbers and citing share point drops from Cosby during the past season.

And unlike "Seinfeld" (which collapsed when it went up against "Home Improvement" on Wednesdays), "Raymond" didn't wilt — it flourished.

That gives "Everybody Loves Raymond" — the show critics have repeatedly singled out as

Ray's Original

one of the best sitcoms on TV — its best shot yet at smash hit status.

Romano's big break seemed to come with "NewsRadio," when he was cast — or, rather, miscast — as the show's fix-it man. During the first day of rehearsals, the actor felt he was struggling.

When his manager Rory Rose-

terman — Jay Leno, Johnny Carson, HBO — and so you have to think everyone's seen me," he says. "Then the show went so well; I thought, wow. But no one called."

"Rory sent out a tape of it and told me someone called from Paramount and said I was a walking sitcom. I said great, do they want

who's out there — admitted that when my pilot came in, she'd never heard of me."

"Everybody Loves Raymond" debuted on a Friday in the fall of 1996, where it was cursed by that night's TGIF reputation for kiddie fare.

"Even my own children wouldn't watch it," he complains. "They wanted to see Sabrina, the Teenage Witch."

Another problem was the ad campaign. "Every ad in TV Guide showed the kids on my lap or the kids on my head. It felt very 'Full House'."

The tots are rarely glimpsed now in commercials and, even during the show, it always seems the tykes have just settled down to a nap.

Nonetheless, in its first season, "Raymond" fell as low as No. 93.

But Romano had two reasons not to despair: the show's production company was David Letterman's Worldwide Pants and its biggest fan was CBS president Leslie Moonves. But don't think the glass is half full yet.

Letterman had previously built two shows around comic Bonnie Hunt and, though she was always singled out for praise, neither series got beyond an abbreviated run. And Moonves' enthusiasm makes Romano nervous, especially when Moonves keeps hyping the show as the heir to "Seinfeld."

But he does admit it's coming into its own.

Early in the second season, they taped a show called "The Brother" that Romano remembers as a turning point, an example of how good the show could be. But that was just the beginning.

By the end of the season, when they had to choose four episodes for their Emmy reel, "the Brother" wasn't even on it," he says. "We'd done that many more good shows."

While Romano will hardly relax — "I like to see the negative side of things" — he can at least enjoy the pressure of success a little more than the pressure of failure.

His friend Kevin James, a Raymond semi-regular, is "freaking out" over the ups and downs of his new sitcom *The King of Queens*.

"Last week he dropped three share points. And when he suffers, I suffer because I'm the first one he calls up to cry about it. When I talk to him I realize how annoying I must sound."

And if the show ever hits No. 1? "It could always be funnier," Romano says, before taking his leave. "OK, I gotta go save a network."

Michael Giltz writes regularly for *Entertainment Weekly*.

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garten woke him at 6:30 in the morning with a phone call, he already knew what was coming. Still, says Rosegarten, "It was the toughest call I've ever had to make."

Then came a gig on David Letterman. He killed 'em, and Rosegarten remembers a producer rushing over right after the show and saying they wanted to do a sitcom with Romano.

Romano, naturally, remembers it a little differently.

"I'd been on everything but Let-

to meet with us? He said, no, the guy just thought you were a walking sitcom."

"Finally, a week later someone from Letterman called us and said, 'We saw you on the show and we want to work with you, so don't make a deal with anyone else before speaking with us.'"

"I wanted to say, 'There is no one else. You're it.' But thank God they were watching their own show."

"Just this year an executive at CBS — and it's their job to know

