

Bill Loud, the Father of TV's 'An American Family,' Is Dead at 97

By [William Yardley](#)

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Bill Loud was not the first person to play the role of a father on television. What made him a pioneer was that he was not acting — and that he was often not acting responsibly.

In 1973, when PBS broadcast “An American Family,” Mr. Loud, who died on Thursday in Los Angeles at 97, was the tan and philandering head of an affluent real-life household whose domestic dramas in Santa Barbara, Calif., were captured on 300 hours of film and edited into 12 hourlong episodes now regarded as the genesis of reality television.

“An American Family” shocked Americans families. Aired with the imprimatur of public broadcasting, it was portrayed as sociological exploration, not exploitation, and although many people found it irresistible, it was also hard to watch.

It showed Mr. Loud’s wife, Pat, bluntly discussing his adultery with her brother and sister-in-law. It showed her telling her husband to move out. It captured the Louds’ oldest son, Lance, living an openly gay life in New York — startling images for many people at the time.

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