

Kids' TV fare is getting better

By JOHN J. O'CONNOR
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After several weekends of watching television programs for children, I have to admit that I still don't know much about children's television — but I know what I like. And what I like, so far at least, may not jibe too closely with the theories of some determined reformers.

A few of the major new offerings deserve further exposure before being scrutinized. Some such as the American Broadcasting Company's "Make a Wish" on Sunday mornings, look like pleasant additions. Others, such as the Columbia Broadcasting System's Saturday morning revival of "You Are There," trigger question marks. The C. B. S. series got off to a painfully crawling start, but last Saturday's episode on Harriet Tubman, heroine of the black "underground railway," scored impressively.

"Take a Giant Step," the National Broadcasting Company's new entry for Saturday morning, is the most adventurous of the lot with a "live" presentation of young people doing, so to speak, their own thing. But the results so far put it in the running for this season's Great American Disaster Award.

Meanwhile, a couple of new programs have been immediately impressive. One, "The Jackson Five" (sic), is a cartoon. The other, "Lidsville," is described as a "live-action fantasy." Both happen to be on A. B. C., on Saturday morning.

"The Jackson Five," produced by Arthur Rankin Jr. and Jules Bass in association with Motown Inc., features the animated adventures of the five young brothers whose peculiar bubble-gum brand of soul music has been distilled in a long list of best-selling records. The cartoons offer good music, the best animation this side of "The Yellow Submarine," and some refreshing black-and-sassy dialogue.

The group so far has been discovered by singer Diana Ross

("Gee, fellows, where'd you all learn to groove like that?") and has made it big in Detroit (pronounced Deeetroit). Now they are simply "on the road," with one episode taking them to the pinestock Music Festival and the unscrupulous promoter Carruthers. "Take the money and scam, that's my motto," snickers the promoter.

But it seems that Carruthers is also planning to chop down part of a forest for his festival site, and the Jackson Five set out to do their bit for preserving

ecology-happy kooks are gonna cut down all the trees I like," mutters Carruthers, "and no ecology-happy kooks are gonna stop me." The scene is set, and the Jackson Five do their good deed for the day. Harmless, entertaining, and instructive to boot — not bad for a cartoon.

"Lidsville" is another matter. It may not be harmless and it is hardly instructive. But it is entertaining. Produced by Sid and Marty Krofft, it features the adventures of a boy who has fallen into a magician's hat and land-

ed in a fantasy world populated by "hat people." The little people, played by a company of midgets, are ruled by a tyrant magician named Hoo-Doo, played by Charles Nelson Reilly. Hoo-Doo goes around zapping people with strange rays from his long, crooked fingers. It's all quite zany and frequently hilarious.

The same producers also have another goofy children's product "The Bugaloos," a Saturday morning offering on N.B.C. That one features a young British

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rock group, complete with wings for flying, and its constant battles with a loony harridan named Benita Bizarre. Benita is played by Martha Raye, and the part is giving the comedienne some of the best and wackiest material she has had in years.

In "Lidsville," Mr. Reilly gets to play the ultimate in snarling and nept villains, constantly in contempt of the hat people's efforts to defend themselves ("Look at the little creeps. They've got to be kidding."). Last week, Hoo-Doo even got to

indulge in a brief love affair, maliciously noting that "being in love is never having to say you're sorry you zapped somebody."

In any of this lunacy good for the kiddies? If not, there might be a solution. Since adult programs such as "Bewitched" are now being run on Saturday mornings as children's fare, children's programs such as "Lidsville" and "The Bugaloos" might be moved to prime-time evening schedules. Given the drab new season, they would be welcome.

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