

## The Golden Age of Radio Comedy

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This paper will describe the evolution of radio comedy from the fledgling years of the 1920's through the impact of television in the early 1950's. It stresses the relationship of radio comedy to American values and society during the Great Depression and World War II. During that time radio became an inexpensive form of home and family entertainment and listening to comedy programs became a national pastime shared by millions of listeners

In her study of American humor, Constance Rourke pointed out that the braggart was a major comic character in frontier legends and tall tales. Radio comedy can be traced back to that tradition of vernacular humor. The paper will also examine the influences vaudeville and other stage comedy had on the comedians. It will show how Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll ( Amos and Andy ) , Jack Benny, and Abbot and Costello , among others created innovative sound entertainment. Particular trends like song and patter and zany humor, and certain problems, like censorship and commercialism are also discussed.

Considering the scope of the subject, as well as the time allotted, the writer had to be selective in choosing the most representative comedians and comedy shows. The paper is not an encyclopedia of radio comedy programs. Such listings of the stars and their broadcasts have already been published and are readily available in written form, on CD's, and tapes, as well as over the internet. I primarily chose comedians who helped develop radio comedy artistically and humorists who had the most popular appeal to listeners. Other shows were selected

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because the broadcasts belonged to significant phases of radio comedy. Above all, I aimed to capture the sounds of American humor on the airwaves.

In the beginning, radio was no laughing matter. People refused to believe that voices could be transmitted through the air. "It's a FAKE!" insisted a visitor at the 1904 World's Fair in St. Louis. "You connect what you send with what is received by a silk thread just so you can say it's Wireless." noted that visitor. For sending a wireless message 300 miles, from St Louis to Chicago, Dr. Lee De Forest was awarded grand prize at the fair. Two years later, DeForest invented the "audian tube", a device which amplified the transmitted sound, but those who sold stock in De Forest's tube were indicted for fraud and sent to prison. "Let me tell you, gentlemen of the jury, these men are preying on the minds of simple people," declared the district attorney. "This device is without merit. It is a piece of glass which has been built in the form of a lamp, not to perform scientific wonders, but to sell stock." Undaunted, Lee DeForest stood behind his invention and predicted, "Someday, news, and even advertising will be sent to the public on the wireless telephone."

Though De Forest successfully transmitted the singing voice of Enrico Caruso through the air in 1910, the accusations of fraud persisted and his invention was ignored for a decade, until Westinghouse launched Pittsburg's KDKA, the first commercially licensed radio station, on November 2, 1920, broadcasting the returns from the Harding-Cox presidential election. RCA produced 5,000 audian tubes monthly for the first 11 months of 1921; in December production increased to 40,000 and five months later to 200,000. People from coast to coast were

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purchasing radio receivers in their local department stores, but there was still little to hear on the airwaves. For the next several years, radio was primarily musical variety programs, and the rest was either educational or cultural.

Song and comedic patter became a fixture of early radio shows. Most local stations operated on a shoe string budget financed by manufacturers and department stores to promote the sale of radios, and thus were unable to procure big-name performers. "In those days, the radio announcers and engineers and everyone went out on the street and dragged people in to go on this thing", recalled Jim Jordan (the future Fibber McGee), "because nobody would go on it. Professional people didn't fool around with this kind of business. They didn't pay anybody." Established vaudeville stars had no interest in using their material in a new medium that paid little or nothing, and feared that audiences wouldn't buy theater tickets to see their acts if they could hear it for free at home. Impresario E.F. Albee distrusted the new medium and insisted that performers who performed on radio would be unwelcomed on his vaudeville stages. Local radio stations, unable to persuade established vaudeville acts to perform on this new medium, focused on developing their own comedy acts.

The chief station announcer also became one of the first comedians on radio. In radio's early years the announcer often managed the station and did all types of duties, from janitor to program director. In order to fill in the program schedule he often told jokes he had pirated from *Joe Miller's Complete Jest Book* and humor magazines such as *College Humor*, *Whiz Bang* and *Madison's Budget*. The station announcer might have stolen these jokes from one of them:

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.....My friend made a fortune in the boat renting business. He put up a sign: RIDES ON THE LAKE, MARRIED MEN 10 CENTS...WIVES THROWN IN FREE

.....or

.....I heard your mother-in-law was dangerously sick...Yes, but now she's dangerously well AGAIN !!

**Billy Jones and Ernie Hare**, a popular recording team, did their first broadcast over WJZ on October 21, 1921. Two years later they signed with the Happiness Candy Company and began radio's first regularly scheduled comedy series, the HAPPINESS BOYS, on WEA. The song-and-patter act moved on to a national arena when RCA purchased WEA in 1926 and began broadcasting the HAPPINESS BOYS over its new network, the National Broadcasting Company. Jones and Hare were the first superstars of the radio and the top comedy team of the 20's. Illness eventually forced Jones to leave the air in 1939, but Billy's 15 year old daughter, Marilyn, took his place, and the act was broadcast for another year as the Heir of Jones and Hare.

Affectionately nicknamed "BANJO EYES", **Comedian Eddie Cantor** became the first of Vaudeville's top acts to hit the big time on the radio. At one time, he was the highest earning entertainer on the airways. Cantor not only adapted his vaudeville routines for radio, but also understood how to engage with an audience of millions.

In the studio, Cantor encouraged participation, insisting the audience was free to laugh at the jokes during broadcasts and cheer after a musical performance. Ratings rose sky high and in 1932 his show captured 58.6% of the radio audience surpassing Amos and Andy and Rudy Vallee.

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Cantor later confided that by listening closely to radio broadcasts, he came to understand that delivery was crucial. And his delivery of jokes and songs, and his acute comic timing were the stuff of legend.

Born Edward Israel Iskowitz on Jan 31, 1892, Cantor grew up on New York's Lower East Side and began his performing career singing and dancing for coins on street corners. After leaving school, he found a job as a singing waiter at Coney Island, sharing the spotlight with his piano player, Jimmy Durante...It was a tough business, but Eddie's unique performance style – prancing around stage, clapping his hands, and goggling his eyes, all the while singing show tunes – was highly popular.

During his time as an entertainer, Eddie Cantor reportedly received 3,200 write in votes in the 1928 presidential election which was won by Herbert Hoover. He died in 1962 at the age of 70.

The influence of vaudeville on early radio comedy can be illustrated best by examining the career of **Ed Wynn**. Wynn, whose real name was Isaiah Edwin Leopold, was born on November 9, 1886, in Philadelphia. His stage name was derived from his middle name – ED – WIN. His father, a wealthy hat manufacturer, wanted him to enter the family business; but the youngster didn't like the work and instead wanted to enter show business. According to his son, Keenan, "he was funnier with the hats than he was at selling them." Even on the radio, he wore several hats to get laughs from the radio audience .

A born comic, Wynn had liked playing the fool as a young boy. He was expelled from school several times for his tomfoolery. He liked to clown on the beach at Atlantic City, where his

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family summered. He ran away from home at 16 and obtained a job as a child actor for \$12.00 per week. The acting company soon folded, and the apprentice actor was left stranded in Bangor, Maine, without a cent in his pocket. He earned his fare back home by playing the piano in a whorehouse...after trying to work for his father again, he left 7 months late and headed for NYC.

One of his best known radio (and eventually television) shows was Texaco's The Fire Chief program which premiered on April 28<sup>th</sup>, 1932 on the NBC Red network on Tuesday night. It immediately became one of the most popular shows on the air and was performed before a live audience. Wynn greeted the audience in the lobby and talked to with them in the aisles. He also charged admission to the broadcasts and donated the proceeds to charity.

The use of a live audience was a daring innovation as spectators had previously either been prohibited in the studio or had viewed the broadcast behind a large "glass curtain". A survey of listeners tastes published in 1935 concluded that most set owners felt that radio humor was improved by audience laughter and applause.

The Fire Chief program was written by Wynn and a "silent partner". The comedian had a file cabinet containing nearly 100,000 gags, and indexed alphabetically by subject matter, from acrobats to zebras. Wynn carefully selected the jokes for his radio program and aimed at approximately 50 laughs on each show. He went on to star on Broadway, television and the movies. When he died in 1966, he was mourned by the entertainment industry as a great artist – a "comedians' comedian" as Jack Benny noted. !

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Radio was becoming a New Way of Life - One can only imagine what these radio programs meant to the original audience who experienced them live. In the 1930's, a single radio, placed in the living room like a fine piece of furniture, was the center of family life and perhaps the most valued item in the home, the magical link to a world of entertainment, news, and culture, the radio had changed people's lives.

Radio required imagination. and although everyone knew that sound effects and scripts were used, somehow the events and broadcasts seemed real. In 1937 nearly 1 ½ million people attended radio broadcasts to see the magic as it was created.

The series began on a fledgling radio network, but Americans soon took **FIBBER McGEE AND MOLLY** into their hearts and within 3 seasons it was the Country's top-rated show. The title The Johnson Wax Program wasn't particularly catchy, but it was a huge hit for sponsors. Real life couple Jim and Marian Jordon played radio characters, Fibber McGee and Molly, a fictional duo who started out as a pair of middle-aged vagabonds. Travelling down America's highways, they occasionally stopped for gasoline and engaging talk about Johnson's car wax. The pair eventually put down roots at 79 Wistful Vista – the raffle prize in a contest Fibber inadvertently won.

Episodes focused on the everyday life they lived and highlighted McGee's pursuit of doomed schemes such as digging for oil in their yard, opening an antiques store, or attempting to run the public library – all to the exasperation of his good-natured wife.



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Various friends and neighbors dropped by, running gags abounded, and lovable characters including Mayor LaTrivia, timid husband Wallace Wimple, and snooty battle-axe Mrs. Uppington, featured in the weekly comic offerings. With upbeat humor, strong characterization, and a tightly-knit cast, the program became popular and built a following among Depression-Era America.

The radio comedy maintained its position among the top-ten shows for decades. McGee's legendary overstuffed closet and the cascade of of rubbish that came tumbling down-with accompanying sound effects- is one of the series best-loved sketches. Fibber opening the hall closet was as funny the 182<sup>nd</sup> time as it was the first.

On March 29, 1932, the man who would soon become America's most popular comedian made his New York radio debut on Ed Sullivan's celebrity interview show. "ladies and Gentlemen, this is **Jack Benny** talking. There will be a slight pause while you say, "Who cares?" Well, the audience cared-for the next 40 years! Jack debuted as host of *The Canada Dry Program* five weeks later, and soon became America's favorite radio personality. *The Jack Benny Program* continued on the air for the next 25 years and on television for 15 additional years.

Born on Valentine's Day, 1894, in Chicago, Benjamin Kubelsky was the eldest child of Eastern European Jewish Immigrant Meyer Kubelsky and his wife Sara. Raised in the gritty northern Illinois manufacturing town of Waukegan, where his father was a moderately successful saloon operator and then a haberdasher, his parents hoped he would become a renowned concert

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violinist. However, Benny was a reluctant student of text books and rigorous music lessons, and by the age of 16 he left school and took a job playing fiddle at Waukegan's Barrison Theater. Following WWI he embarked on a vaudeville career playing the violin less and joking more. Kubelsky encountered difficulty with his stage name as it sounded too much like the famous violinist Jan Kubelik and so after a few iterations he styled himself, "Jack Benny."

In the crunch of the Great Depression of 1932, with vaudeville and Broadway revues fading and film roles unsatisfactory, Jack Benny decided to try his hand at radio comedy. By 1936, The Jack Benny Program was number one in popularity polls. The show's highlights included the long running feud with fellow comedian Fred Allen (fictional of course), gags featuring a pet polar bear named Carmichael, and material about Benny's run-down Maxwell and Rochester the lovable butler, and Don Wilson, the leather lunged salesman. Running jokes contributed to his growing popularity. He always insisted he was never older than 39, was a skinflint, and had difficulty playing "Love in Bloom" on the violin.

Radio led to a maturing of American popular humor. Comedians could no longer rely on facial gestures, baggy pants or props to produce laughs. They had to develop better crafted humor which appealed to a wide cross-section of the American public. "The radio comedian is consistently challenged by this very diverse audience", explained comic Billy B. Van. "He cannot tell witticisms that appeal locally, he cannot tell stories that hold a race, a class or a religion up to ridicule, he cannot jest of things which are unfamiliar to the everyday life of the listeners." The best radio comedians began moving away from vaudeville farce and injected human values into American comedy. "American humor came out of the barnyard",

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proclaimed Jack Benny. “Cleaned up and perfumed, sparked by these unsung heroes, the gag writers, you get enough laughs to make your mother-in-law seem welcome.”

And among the best of the radio humorists were **George Burns and Gracie Allen**. Burns was born Nathan Birnbaum in Manhattan on January 20, 1896 and began his show business career at the age of seven, singing on street corners with the PeeWee Quartet. He worked small time vaudeville houses until he teamed up with Gracie Allen in 1923. She originally played straight man to George’s comic but “even her straight lines got laughs, “ Burns recalled. “I knew right away that there was something between the audience and Gracie. They loved her, and so, not being a fool, and wanting to smoke cigars the rest of my life, I gave her the jokes.” During the next few years, Gracie perfected her characterization as a “dizzy girl” and George traded in his baggy pants to become one of the best cigar smoking straight men in the business.

In 1933, Gracie embarked on a brilliant publicity campaign to promote the new White Owl Program claiming to be searching for her missing brother. Gracie burst on Eddie Cantors program, then Jack Benny’s and then Rudy Valleys’ and continued her search across the dial over all networks...radio listeners had no idea where she would show up. Even Frank Buck, the famous “Bring-Em Back Alive” big game hunter, joined the search. “Suddenly, everyone wanted to get in on the gag”, Burns later recalled. No “bit” ever captured the attention of the public as this one did!”

Radio gave birth to the situation comedy and a totally new comic form. It ventured beyond crude gag-oriented sketches and involved listeners in middle class lives not so unlike their own – simple, homey incidents inflated into domestic farce. Radio was the “massest” of mass entertainment, and its audience, mostly middle brow and increasing suburban was amused and flattered seeing itself reflected in shows that made light of its travails; but never questioned the family unit.

The **Aldrich Family** didn’t know from divorced parents or single mothers, nor did it speak incessantly about the nuclear family because it had not yet been threatened.

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The program, which lasted 14 years, set the tone for sitcoms and was the first major show about teenagers focusing on the comic exploits of Henry Aldrich as he navigated the challenges of growing up. Youngsters were quick to identify with Henry, a typical teenager in high school, who seemed incapable of staying out of trouble. Henry and his pal Homer faced adolescent tribulations on a weekly basis. Their antics made some listeners nostalgic for their own teenage years and others roar with laughter. The success of the program stemmed from its insight into the curious facet of teenage life and that's why, perhaps, teenagers made up the largest group of faithful listeners.

Cast changes over the years included 3 different mothers, 7 sisters and 3 fathers. Many consider Ezra Stone, the first and the last Henry Aldrich, the best among the youthful souls because of his traditional, obedient response, "Coming Mother"!

Set in Harlem's Black Community, **The Amos n' Andy Show** provoked debate about racial stereotyping almost from the start. Two white radio actors, Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll, created and wrote the programs; they also voiced the African-American leads, Amos Jones and Andy Brown.

On another level, however, the sitcom about the owners of a taxi cab company was ground breaking. The program invented broadcasting syndication, established serial drama and became radio's first, nationwide phenomenon. To such an extent that when Amos 'n Andy was heard over the airwaves, movie theatres momentarily stopped the show to pipe the episode through the speakers.

More than 4000 of the 15 minute serials were broadcast 5 and 6 days a week, starting the spring of 1928 when they signed with WMAQ Chicago. After they moved to NBC in 1929, Lever Brothers stepped in as the sponsor to promote Pepsodent tooth powder. As the series progressed, the scripts placed more emphasis on character development and there was a more realistic portrayal of real-life hardships that inner city Black people faced.

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In 1943 the format was revised and Amos 'n Andy's role minimized to provide more airtime for George "Kingfish" Stevens – the head of the Mystic Knights of the Sea Lodge Fraternity. The Kingfish was a small time hustler who exploited Andy's generosity. By this time, African Americans were depicted in the show as respectable business owners and managers, not stereotyped low paying cab drivers.

Ironically, in 1951, when Amos 'n Andy transitioned to television, with Black actors playing the lead roles, CBS came under criticism from the NAACP and pressure from the organization caused the show's cancellation in 1953.

The verbal repartee of **Bud Abbott and Lou Costello** was perfectly suited to radio and the comedy duo became an overnight success following the first broadcast of their now classic, "Who's on First" routine. "The power of radio to help careers has never been better illustrated than in the case of these Rowdy Boys of stage, screen and the airwaves – Abbott and Costello", observed critic Jack Gaver – "They came out of burlesque with not much more than their appetites and now they can count their joint income in 7 figures – radio provided that boost and made it possible."

William "Bud" Abbott was born in Asbury Park, N.J. on October 2, 1900. His father was an advance man for Ringling Brothers Circus who later went on to work for a chain of burlesque theaters and got "Bud" a position as assistant cashier in Brooklyn.

Louis Francis Costello was born May 8, 1908 in Patterson, N.J. and perfected his comedic abilities in P.S. 11. His teacher made the class clown write, "I'm a Bad Boy" repeatedly on the blackboard. Costello later turned his punishment into his verbal trademark, "I'm a Baad Boy!". He quit school to pursue acting and then prizefighting and eventually as an MGM stuntman – he joked, "I was much thinner then!"

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Bud and Lou met in 1936 and teamed up but their career as burlesque comics was cut short when NY Mayor LaGuardia shutdown NY's burlesque houses in 1937. Their radio break came as they were brought into substitute temporarily for Henny Youngman on Kate Smith's radio program and they eventually became regulars before leaving NYC for Hollywood.

Perhaps no better testament to Abbott and Costello's dedication to radio comedy occurred on the evening of Nov. 4, 1943. While rehearsing for their radio show, Lou heard the news that his young son, "Butch" had drowned in the family pool, just two days before his first birthday. Costello rushed home, but returned to the studio later to perform with Abbott. At the conclusion of the show, Lou left the stage in tears, and Abbott told the shocked audience about the tragedy.

During radio's 1948-49 Season, a general uneasiness settled over the radio industry. Executives worried about the advent of television and its effect on radio, and ratings fell as more people bought TV sets and became addicted to this "new gadget" in their living rooms. "Something was happening to the radio comedy," wrote Steve Allen. "People were listening to the old programs out of habit more than anything else. And many weren't listening at all."

Radio comedy, once the most popular form on the airwaves competed against other types of programs. Drama shows such as The Lux Radio Theater often drew larger audiences. Quiz shows became a broadcasting fad, with winners receiving substantial prize money – shows like "You Bet Your Life" was hosted by comedian Groucho Marx, and Eddie Cantor was the MC for "Take It or Leave It."

In the 50's, the automobile radio and the portable radio became fashionable and people listened to their car radio for weather, traffic reports, and instant news. Stations specialized in

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playing “rock-and-roll” or, like Black stations, developed their programming to attract a particular audience. Housewives listened to “soap operas” while they worked. By contrast, the only major evening comedy show on the air in 1956 was “The Charlie McCarthy Show”, which was sustained by CBS.

The last official network comedy was the Stan Freberg Show which was broadcast for only 15 weeks in the summer of 1957 on CBS on Sunday night at 7:00 pm – Jack Benny’s old time slot.

There’s no question that times change and everything changes with them. The simple living room in the minds of The Aldrich Family’s audiences was replaced by the visible, complicated set of “As The World Turns”, filmed in a large studio. But what has been lost by all this?? Some may argue that nothing has been lost but that everything has been gained – in technology and in entertainment – along came complicated cameras, sets, mics, and amazing advances from Black and White to Color and the startling realism of the liquid flat screen.

Nothing today is left to the imagination. Gone are the days when, in front of the Philco’s, one could walk alongside Matt Dillion on the dusty streets in Gunsmoke’s Dodge City or cringe in one’s chair in a darkened room being menaced by creepy characters in “The Shadow”.

Radio’s brief life as Americas main source of entertainment was just about over, a mere thirty-fives after it had first appeared with the broadcast pf the 1920 Harding-Cox presidential election returns, a short span for an age that had produced such a cornucopia of performing legends and had changed the face of pop culture in American, indeed, has changed America itself – and created an audience of “showbiz junkies”, “jingle humming “ listeners, and swarms of news, sports, drama, music and literature lovers.

By the end, ...the glory that was radio was GONE, leaving only as Fred Allen noted, “the echo of forgotten laughter...”

## The Golden Age of Radio Comedy

All clips found on YouTube - some on Yosh's file

KDKA – 1 <sup>st</sup> Commercial Broadcast	0:0 – 1:19
Happiness Boys	0:07 – 0:45
Eddie Cantor	01:20 - 02:23
Ed Wynn	0:0 -- 01:31
Fibber McGee (episode 3/5/40 – Cleaning the Hall Closet)	03:59 – 04:38
Jack Benny (Your Money or Your Life)	0:0 – 0:40
Burns and Allen (radio show 3/31/49 – How Jack Benny Became Cheap)	0:0 – 0:36
Aldrich Family (Aldrich Family Halloween)	0:00 – 0:20
Amos 'n Andy (Employment Agency w/ Jack Benny)	0:0 – 0:30
Abbott and Costello (Whose on First)	01:28 – 02:28

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