

# SPEAKING OF RADIO



## Chuck Schaden's Conversation with ART LINKLETTER



*Some time ago we had the opportunity to visit Art Linkletter in his office in Beverly Hills, California. We noted that, during the golden age of radio, he put together a program called People Are Funny, a mostly visual, audience participation program. How he translated the visual to the audio was what we wanted to know and we asked how he was able to accomplish that.*

Well, of course we didn't know anything about television when we started it so we didn't have any problems. We just described everything that went on and prayed for the day when television would arrive. And of course when television did arrive, we found out that it had many, many limitations and that a lot of the fun of *People Are Funny* was gone because anticipation is greater than realization. And things that you could describe as being funny often weren't really that funny. So it was a very interesting experience to have spent ten years in radio, waiting for television, and then to find out that it had many, many limitations on it.

Radio's a participatory experience and television is a passive, spectator sport where everything is laid out for you and you have no room for imagination; no room for heightened enjoyment of things depending on your own cultural and educational background. It's all laid out flat. Whereas in the old days on *People Are Funny*, to use an extreme example, we would hit somebody in the face with a chocolate meringue pie. If you were listening to it, you could visualize that as aesthetically as you wished it to be or as crudely and burlesque as you wished it to be. When it was on television, there was no possible point of interpretation. There

it was and it made some people angry and it made some people happy.

*Where did People Are Funny come from in the first place? How did it all begin?*

I was doing a number of radio shows in San Francisco. I was the Mr. Radio of San Francisco, doing twenty-one shows a week on seven stations: *Man in the Street*, *Who's Dancing Tonight* from the ballroom, and *Are You a Genius?* from Oakland, and many other programs. And it occurred to me that a program built on psychology would be most interesting since I was a psychology minor in college, an English major, so I devised a program idea called *Meet Yourself* in which I would get people up to the microphone, have them answer questions or participate in a stunt and then have a famous psychologist from Stanford University come into the picture and interpret that person's personality. Is he an ambivert or an introvert or an extrovert or whatever he was depending upon what the stunt was. And then we would go on to the next stunt.

I came to Hollywood one time on a chore that was not related to this and I ran into a man named John Guedel. And he had exactly the same idea, only he had a psychologist from USC and he called it *People Are Funny* while mine was *Meet*

## SPEAKING OF RADIO

I was so concerned about the worries of television and the transition that I went over to ABC and sold the Jolly Green Giant a show called *Life With Linkletter* which was really a hidden version of *People Are Funny* under a different title. And so there I was, on all three networks—the real *People are Funny* on NBC radio, the substitute *People Are Funny* under a different title on television on ABC, and the *House Party* on radio.

*Life With Linkletter* show which ran for a year and a half before NBC decided that *People Are Funny* had the priority and wanted it on the air on television. We found, on *Life With Linkletter*, for instance, that if we gave a lady a skunk and sent her up Hollywood Boulevard on a mission, that the description of the expressions on the faces of the passers-by evoked a much better image in the listener's eye than the occasional blase and even indifference with which you would greet a lady with a skunk on a leash on Hollywood Boulevard!

*Was People Are Funny live on television or was it on film?*

It was live at first and then it was filmed.

*Was it better on film or live?*

It was better on film because we could edit. And some great, great stunts didn't pay off the way they should have because people didn't react the way they should have.

I'm amused at today's game shows which I see on TV. When a person wins money, he jumps up and down and squeals and yells and kisses the emcee and falls down and does all that stuff. That's not natural. That's not the way people react. That's all coached. That's not only coached but it's threatened. If they don't react that way, they're never seen. We never told people how to react.

*Did you ever have any problems with people's reactions?*

Our only problem was, they didn't react strongly enough. We'd give somebody a house or a car and they'd say "Thanks." We would put together two brothers who hadn't seen each other for thirty-five years, separated by family problems. We brought them together and they'd say "Hi, Joe" instead of crying. On the other hand, there were times we got gigantic response out of very little things. You just don't know. People are funny! They're unpredictable. And if you look at the shows across the board today in the daytime, you'll see that they are predictable and they are the same and they are reacting exactly like two peas in a pod, whatever show you see.

*You were doing an audience participation show probably before anyone else was doing it.*

Ralph Edwards and myself and John Guedel, we three, my partner John and myself and Ralph. He had *Truth Or Consequences* and the two shows started at approximately the same time. We were fighting all the time about who got the ideas and who didn't and now, of course, we're good friends. But there was a lot of tension in the early days when we were both trying to make it. But we originated,

Chuck Schaden's



## SPEAKING OF RADIO

*Conversations with . . .*

- |                                      |  |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Dennis Day  | <input type="checkbox"/> Edgar Bergen  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Rudy Vallee | <input type="checkbox"/> Harold Peary  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Kate Smith  | <input type="checkbox"/> Elliott Lewis |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Don Ameche  | <input type="checkbox"/> Jack Benny    |

. . . and many others

may be obtained on custom cassette tape recordings. For a list of interviews available, send a self-addressed, stamped envelope to:

**SPEAKING OF RADIO**

**Box 421, Morton Grove, IL 60053**



between the three of us, about a third of all the shows you see today, like *To Tell The Truth*, *The Price Is Right*, and *Let's Make A Deal*. We were hiding prizes in boxes and behind screens.

I never did care for quiz shows. Never wanted to do a quiz show, although I've done some. But I always wanted to have audience reactions to people undergoing real life hazards and problems. We've done everything.

*Were there any stunts that really backfired?*

Oh, yes. We had people, for instance, who got mad on stage. We got two neighbors together one time and neither one of them knew they were going to be on the program and we had researched and discovered that they had a problem in the neighborhood and they feuded. And we thought if we got them on the air in front of a live coast to coast audience and confronted them with the childishness of a simple argument over a dog, they would get back together again. And we'd give them a wonderful prize of a trip to Europe together. Well, they would have nothing

of this. When they found that the other one was on the stage, fireworks ensued and they wouldn't talk to each other and they wouldn't accept a prize and they made it even worse than it was before because now it was out in the open nationally. That was a surprise because they were both nice ladies and both reasonable separately. But it demonstrated to me very forcibly how Hatfield and McCoy feuds began almost from something they couldn't remember but at the end were killing each other over the growth of an animosity.

*On the other hand, was there a stunt or an event on the program that turned out so much better than you had expected? Something that had extra benefits to it?*

Oh yes. That often happened. Everything happened on the show. In nineteen years there's nothing you could mention that didn't happen because we had people who, as a result of some stunt, changed their whole lives.

We did a thing where we took a sealed, plastic case with a telephone number and an address inside of it, and we dropped twelve of these into the Pacific Ocean. And they said the first person who breaks this open and phones us will get a ten thousand dollar reward. Months went by and then one day we got a short-wave message from an atoll in the South Pacific. A native boy had found this on a beach in an incommunicable-type atoll and they waited for a month to get favoring winds so they could bring it to the naval base in a twin-hulled canoe. And the guy broke it open—they were afraid it might be a Japanese bomb—and we flew this young man all the way from this atoll in the South Pacific to Hollywood, did a stunt with him, showed him things to do, gave him money to go out and buy whatever a guy would buy with fifty dollars in an hour in stores he never even dreamed existed and come back and report. But anyhow, we gave him the ten thousand dollars as a final blow-off and he went back and changed the entire life of that island. For instance, they had never

## SPEAKING OF RADIO

had water supplies that were dependable. And with that money they built a reservoir to catch the rain that came at intervals and they set up a medical center. This ten thousand dollars just changed the whole life of those people forever on that little island.

*It's amazing what a radio show can do.*

It really is.

*Where did the idea come from for the House Party?*

I was in San Francisco, flying up and back every week to do *People Are Funny* 'cause I still was doing my shows in San Francisco.

*Were you still doing those twenty some shows every week?*

I cut 'em down to about four or five, but I like to live in San Francisco. So I stayed up there and I'd be doing a man in the street show for a couple of hundred dollars on Market Street one night. The next night I'd be in Hollywood emceeing a coast to coast radio show. It seemed a little incongruous but I enjoyed both lives. So I started interviewing kids up in San Francisco as part of a show called *What's Doing, Ladies*, for Safeway Stores, and John Guedel and I had an idea. Why don't we sell a show called *Under 21*, five-a-week, daytime, where we take kids from three to 21 and vary all the things they do from accomplishments to little malaprops. So we cut a record and John took it back and Young and Rubicam liked it and submitted it to General Electric and they liked it but they said, "We want a five-a-week, half-hour show, but we only want kids for about eight or ten minutes. So we went to work, figured out a lot of other things to do, and used the kids as the only feature five days a week and did things that I was doing in San Francisco like looking in ladies' purses and, naturally, interviewing guest celebrities and authors and things like you're doing right now. And GE bought it and



that show stayed on the air for twenty-five years.

*And that made a very easy transition to television.*

Very easy. Much more so than the other.

*Was it being simulcast at any time?*

Yes, for three or four years, five years.

*You must have had some pretty interesting experiences with the kids because they really are unpredictable.*

Yes. It led me into a whole new way of life because I wrote the book *Kids Say The Darndest Things* out of my experiences. It was the number one best-seller for two years in a row, unheard of, in the nation. People remember the kids more than they remember the rest of the show. And a lot of people say to me you used to have that show where you interviewed kids. And I say that was only five minutes out of thirty. How about the other twenty-five? You know, they were good minutes too.

But the idea of interviewing children was so unusual and was so difficult, very few



people were able to do it. And it was so startling and in those early days of radio when censorship was quite intense. You know, we couldn't use words like "pregnant". You couldn't say a woman was pregnant; that was a no-no. It was terrible. Now they not only say it but tell you how she got that way, in detail, in front of an audience and they'll applaud! But how times have changed.

So, the kids would say things that the network would let go by because they were said in innocence by a child that they would never let a writer write or a professional performer say. And, you know, I'd say to a child, "What does your mother and dad do for fun?" and he'd say "Search me, they always lock the door." Well, a CBS censor would faint at letting that pass on a show like *The Jack Benny Show* or the *Burns And Allen Show* but they could get by because what does a five-year-old kid know? They wouldn't let me repeat it as a story that was said because I know what he said. But he could say it.

*And you, indeed, sometimes baited them on a little bit.*

Oh, yes. There's no doubt about it and I got criticized by people who said you shouldn't encourage children and I say, "Well, what do you want?" A kid says his dad's a painter or a plumber. That's not very funny. But if he says "My dad likes to play poker every Monday night in the basement with the minister," then we got something. But we never told them to say it and we never cued them to say it.

I had a very smart teacher who picked them up at school each morning at nine o'clock in a limousine. The school chose the kids, you know. We had nothing to do with who the kids were and we went right down all the schools. We had a very difficult thing to get and that was the approval of the Board of Education, Los Angeles, for children to be taken out of school on a school day and taken to a commercial radio show. Now, you know, that takes a

lot of approval. And so we had to agree to go through all the schools. We had the black schools and the brown schools and we had the ghetto schools at a time when they never got any nod of recognition from anybody. That was a long time ago, before this whole matter of civil rights and equal rights and ethnic rights was even dreamed of. And we went right down the line and those schools got television sets and radio sets and record players for their use which were very valuable and we also got kids who were great.

The teacher would be with them for about two and a half hours, they would tour CBS and so forth. And while she was with them, what she was really doing was interviewing them and they didn't know it. She'd bring up subjects and talk about things and if a kid said something that was very cute, she'd jot it down. Now, the chances of that kid saying the same thing to the same question was the shot I had. And quite often, they never said the same thing twice because they weren't told to and they may not have really believed it or they may not have thought about it again.

I'll give you an example of a five or six year old child who was riding along and the teacher said, "Well, let's play a little game. Who's the president of the United States?" And one of them says "Abraham Lincoln is the president of the United States right now." That's pretty funny. So she'd jot it down, make a little note of it. She'd give me the note. Meantime, in the bathroom, one of the other kids said "You're an idiot. Abraham Lincoln or George Washington isn't the president." And they'd say, "The real president is Lyndon Johnson, or Kennedy or Truman" or whoever it really was. And so when I'd ask the kid the question, I'd get an answer that had been corrected. On the other hand, I got answers that were corrected wrong. They told him "Abraham Lincoln is not the president of the United States. It's George Washington" 'cause they didn't know either.

## SPEAKING OF RADIO

One time I had a note that a little boy had a pet turtle named Ozzie Nelson. I thought that was kind of cute. So I said to the boy "Do you have a pet?" and he said, "Yeah." I said "Well, what is it?" and he said "It's a dog." And I said, "What's its name?" and he says "Rover" or something like that, dull. And I said, "Well, didn't you ever have any other kind of a pet?" And he said, "Oh, we use to have a turtle but my dad flushed that down the toilet." So you see, I got a better one! I also got disappointments where I had great answers from the children that I knew they'd said and I never could get it back. Never could get it back . . . That's the way it worked and so it was fun for me.

And I got a lot of things, of course, that the teacher never heard of because I had a way with children. And the secret of my success with children was really quite simple. Number one, I'm a good communicator, anyway, with anybody. Number two, the children who are on the program had all seen the program. So they knew what was expected and that was, I was gonna talk to them. They weren't surprised, they weren't baffled. And they also knew that they could do what other kids were doing. And they'd just talk about things they knew about. They weren't going to be asked to juggle, sing, ride a unicycle or do something that was beyond their ability. So they're ready for it.

### NOSTALGIA DIGEST

#### BACK ISSUES AVAILABLE

A limited number of back issues of the *Nostalgia Digest and Radio Guide* are available for \$2 each. For a complete list, send a stamped, self-addressed envelope to:

NOSTALGIA DIGEST ARCHIVES  
Box 421  
Morton Grove, IL 60053

They'd been brainwashed, so to speak, at least indoctrinated by just watching or listening to the show on the radio.

And then finally, in the third place, a most important thing occurred before we went on the air. And that is, I went in and talked to them for five minutes. And in that talking to them I did something essential to the communication with children. I let the children see the child in me. In other words, I played games with the kids. I was not a big distant, grown-up figure. They recognized in me somebody of the same mental intelligence and level! At least the same emotional quotient . . . They weren't afraid of me. They knew I was gonna play games and they like to play games. I played games with them in the dressing rooms. So when I got out on the air, we were just going on.

Of course the little ones didn't know what was going on. A four year old often would come up to me after the program was over and pull my sleeve and say, "Mr. Linkletter" and I'd say, "Yes" and he'd say, "When does the show start?" I'd say, "What did you think that was out there?" "Oh, that was the show." But, of course, those were the kind, the little three and four year olds who are just, you know, floating free. They're just marvelous, like the little girl, I said to her, "What do you do?" And she said, "I help my mother in the house." And I said, "Well, you're only three and a half, four. What can you do around the house?" She says, "I help her with the breakfast." I said, "Come on, what do you do?" She says, "Well, I put the bread in the toaster. Of course I can't flush it." One of the little boys, I said to him, "Do you get an allowance?" And he says, "What's that?" I said, "Oh, I guess you don't know what that is. It's money you get for being a good boy." "Oh yeah," he says, "I guess I do." I said, "Well, what do you get?" He says "I get a nickel every day I have a dry bed." And I said to him, "Well how much money have you made this summer?" and he said "Nothing."



*Kids say the darndest things, don't they?*

They were a delight. Just a delight. I had a little boy who had a Mickey Mouse wrist-watch on. Somebody had given it to him for a birthday. I said, "Oh, you got a watch." He said, "Yes sir," I said, "What time does it say?" He said, "It doesn't say anything, you gotta look at it." Very direct. An older boy one time, I said to him, "What did your mother tell you when you came down here today?" "She just told me to be a normal boy" and I said, "Well, what is a normal boy?" He says, "I think it's 98.6." These kids, you know, come up with some surprising bits of flashes of information.

*You often asked what somebody told them not to say.*

Oh yes. I had to do that protectively because the parents were getting nervous and they were brainwashing the children. You see, we never told the children what to say. But it finally worked out that the parents did. They were telling them what

not to say. And, of course, I double-crossed them very easily by asking them what they had been told not to say. And it came out letter perfect because they had been rehearsed, you know. A little boy said, "My mother told me not to announce to the world she's pregnant." "Well," I said, "why not? That's a marvelous thing." He says, "She ain't yet." Or the little boy, I said "What did your mother tell you not to say today?" He said, "Well, she told me I could say anything but don't get this shirt dirty because it's brand new, it doesn't fit, and we're going to take it back when I get home."

*Those are marvelous things. You made an interesting transition from radio and television into movies. You were in a couple of films, too, weren't you?*

Yes, I tried everything. I suppose when you're hot in this business, and you can get any door open, that you allow yourself to play with your own ego and your own vanity and imagine yourself to be some other thing than you are. You know, the clown wants to play *Pagliacci* and the quizmaster wants to be a movie hero or whatever. And I've tried them and I wasn't particularly successful, frankly.

In the first place, I didn't like them. I don't like movies and I wasn't very good at it. I'm very good at being Art Linkletter. I am not very good at being the *Count of Monte Crisco* . . . But the things that I played. I played a preacher. I played a wagon-master in a *Wagon Train*. I did play a couple of emcees in pretty good sized movies. One was with Ronald Colman, Vincent Price and Celeste Holm called *Champagne For Caesar*. And it still plays. I see it one o'clock in the morning. There's this young kid, kind of frightening.

But I didn't like movies. They were mechanical. They were artificial. They are. They're shot out of context and out of sequence, in little bits and drips and drabs and they're super rehearsed and you take one scene over fifteen times and the one you hate the director picks. It's not

## SPEAKING OF RADIO

your own business. It's somebody else's business and it's like assembling a car bolt by bolt and the back wheel may go on first and the top go on last or first, and you know, it's a different technique and I don't care for it.

*I can see that it would be tough for you because as the master of ceremonies on a couple of really great radio and TV shows, you really were in control. Everything depends on you.*

I was editing my own show. I was the director. I was everything 'cause I decided how long something should go within the context of the overall half-hour. And even more importantly, for me there was an audience to bounce against. If I did something and I didn't feel the audience reaction, I'd change right then and there and moved it around to what the audience told me by their reaction was the right thing. But how do you know what's right when you're playing a scene with some grip smoking a cigar four feet away from you, looking on in a bored fashion. Not me. That's for Jimmy Stewart . . . It's a different kind of a thing. You underplay.

MANY  
**OLD TIME  
RADIO SHOWS**  
ARE AVAILABLE ON  
CASSETTE TAPE

For a complete list of all  
the tapes in our  
CASSETTE COLLECTION

Send  
a long, self-addressed  
stamped envelope to  
**THE HALL CLOSET**  
Box 421, Morton Grove, IL 60053

*Since the House Party and People Are Funny have gone off the air, what have you been doing?*

I've been lecturing and making personal appearances and doing specials. Not only did I have my fill of the frothy, fun, game-type of entertainment world for all those years, and had been successful in it and done everything you can do but also the death of my daughter changed my life and made me more serious and also made me want to do more meaningful things. So, starting out with my drug abuse crusade, I got into many other kinds of lectures on salesmanship, and on business and on the American Family. I do fundraisers for colleges, chamber of commerce dinners and big convention meetings; about ninety personal appearances a year, I write books and I'm involved in probably twelve businesses. Deeply involved.

*What kind of businesses are you involved with?*

Oh, building office complexes, publishing books, packaging toys and games, oil and gas business, sheep and cattle, real estate development, manufacturing, all kinds of things.

*Very much out of the show biz scene . . .*

Very much. I'm very much at home in business. Hard business. And I serve on the boards of directors of a number of major companies like MGM, Western Airlines, National Liberty, and so forth.

*I want to thank you very much for spending some time with us and also, I want to thank you for all the entertainment you've provided for all of us over the years.*

Yes, you look like about the age that could have been one of the kids on my show.

*I could have, but my mother told me never to go on! Thanks very much, Art Linkletter.*

Delighted.