



By BOB KOLOSOSKI

In the beginning there was the silent movie. At the time it was the most popular form of entertainment and was considered by many to be the consummate art form of the 20th century. It created movie stars who were the idols of millions and it generated vast fortunes for the men who commanded the studios. It all ended rather abruptly in 1927 when sound invaded the movie theatres and the masses paid to hear the movies talk. As time marched on the moviegoer began listening to another type of entertainment. It was free and came into their living rooms, dens, and bedrooms. It was the radio.

People heard the radio stars but couldn't see them — in direct contrast to the silent films — and their curiosity about radio performers grew. It didn't take movie moguls long to experiment with putting radio stars in movies to see if they could attract paying audiences to the theatres.

In 1930 RKO signed Amos 'n' Andy (Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll) to star in "Check and Double Check." The film featured Duke Ellington and his Cotton Club Orchestra and a paper-thin plot. The novelty of America's favorite radio stars in a movie brought fans to theatres and the film was an unprecedented success. The pattern of gross receipts, however, indicated that the movie had absolutely no "hold-over" value. This caused RKO's brass to quickly terminate the services of Amos 'n' Andy, setting a pattern for the other studios to follow: capitalize on the popularity of radio stars,

but beware of their fleeting attraction to the public.

Ironically, RKO would be the leader in using radio talent throughout the 1930s and 1940s. By the mid-1930s RKO executives (a new team of producers and decision-makers had taken over since the Amos 'n' Andy experience) were ready to try a radio star in a feature film.

Joe Penner had literally burst onto the radio scene with the catch phrases, "You nas-ss-sty man!" "Wanna buy a duck?" and "Don't you ever do that!" His talent was limited, but in 1937 he was the hottest performer on the airwaves. RKO planned a mega-film titled "New Faces of 1937" designed to show off some of the new talent they were nurturing. Joe Penner, Parkyakarkas and Milton Berle headlined a large cast that included Harriett Hillard and Ann Miller. The movie failed to capture an audience and sealed the fate for any future "New Faces" films.

Joe Penner stayed on at RKO and made seven films in four years. None were outstanding but a couple were mild financial successes. His last film "The Millionaire Playboy" was one of the Penner series' best but the studio bosses had finally given up on making Joe Penner a movie star.

As Penner left RKO for the last time, Lum and Abner (Chester Lauck and Norris Goff) were crossing the studio gates for the first time. Their 1940 feature "Dreaming Out Loud" was much more subdued than Penner's wacky films and it was much



LUM AND ABNER (Chester Lauck and Norris Goff) at the Jot-Em-Down Store in one of several movies they made at RKO.

more palatable to movie viewers. Somehow Phil Harris from the Jack Benny show found his way to the Jot-Em-Down Store, and that helped make the film good enough to launch a series. Lauck and Goff decided one film a year was enough for them and their fans and that's what they did until 1946 when "Partners in Time" ended the series. This final film was something of a milestone for the two partners as it explained how Lum and Abner met and decided to open their famous little store in Pine Ridge, Arkansas.

Not all radio stars were strictly comedians as was the case with band leader Kay Kyser. His "Kollege of Musical Knowledge" was a radio quiz show with music and corny one-liners. Nevertheless it was a very popular show and RKO

suggested doing a movie with Kay and his crazy colleagues playing themselves. "That's Right — You're Wrong" was a mess of a movie with a plot only the screenwriter could love. Somehow Kay and his friends stuck with the nonsense and so did the public who turned out *en masse* to see the film. The film earned a profit of \$219,000 and the chance for Kay to make another. The second film, however, was not entirely Kay's movie because producer David Butler wisely decided to hire Boris Karloff, Bela Lugosi and Peter Lorre as co-stars to menace Mr. Kyser. The movie "You'll Find Out" was not a masterpiece but earned a profit and Kay and his band would do three more films before the magic wore out.

While Kay, Ish Kabibble and the band were running amuck on one side of the

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RKO lot, Edgar Bergen, Charlie McCarthy, Fibber McGee and Molly and Throckmorton P. Gildersleeve were on the other side making "Look Who's Laughing." The film featured Lucille Ball, Isabel Randolph, Neil Hamilton and Harlow Wilcox. It was produced and directed by legendary silent film director Allan Dwan. Once again the screen writers completed a so-so script but the very talented stars overcame the material and ran away with the box office.

"Look Who's Laughing" was the sleeper hit of 1941 and generated a sequel, "Here We Go Again." This time around Gale Gordon, Ginny Simms and Ray Noble and his band joined Edgar, Charlie, Fibber, Molly and Gildy in a multi-layered plot that went nowhere but to the top of the box office. The studio was amazed at

the two films' success figures and not being able to leave well enough alone spun off Harold Peary in his own Great Gildersleeve series (four films in two years) and put Edgar Bergen on reserve while they made plans for Jim and Marion Jordan. The idea was to take a Frank Capra concept and blend it with a war theme adding Fibber and Molly as the glue to hold the entire production together. "Heavenly Days" failed to present Fibber McGee as the brass and boisterous everyman he was on the radio. The film lost big at ticket sales and the McGees were unceremoniously sent packing back to the safety of 79 Wistful Vista.

RKO's boldest move regarding radio stars was to sign the 25-year-old "boy genius" of radio, Orson Welles. His Mercury Theatre on the Air produced the "War of the Worlds" broadcast that panicked America. Welles' first project at RKO was "Citizen Kane," arguably the



FIBBER MC GEE AND MOLLY (Jim and Marion Jordan) meet Charlie McCarthy and Edgar Bergen in a scene from "Look Who's Laughing."



BIG BROADCAST OF 1938 boasted an all-star cast, many from the world of radio: Ben Blue, Dorothy Lamour, W.C. Fields, Shirley Ross, Bob Hope, Martha Raye. Hope and Ross sang "Thanks for the Memory" in this film.

greatest American film ever made. As a producer-director and star Welles tore up the scenery at RKO for five years with films such as "The Magnificent Ambersons" (as writer-producer-director), "Journey Into Fear" (as producer) and "The Stranger" (as director-star). His stormy career at RKO was always news in Tinsel Town and he stepped on more toes than a dancer with two left feet. However, Welles' RKO films hold up well today and are still worth viewing.

Meanwhile, down the street from RKO, Paramount was testing the waters with its own troupe of radio stars moonlighting as movie actors. In 1932 Paramount released "The Big Broadcast" with Bing Crosby making his Paramount debut. Six years later Bob Hope would make his Paramount debut in "The Big Broadcast of 1938."

Both men would stay at Paramount until the late 1950's and carry on successful radio and movie careers simultaneously. It is difficult to say if they were radio stars who made movies or movie stars who had radio shows. When Bing won the Oscar for "Going My Way" he definitely joined the realm of film greats but Bob Hope never hit the cinematic heights of Der Bingle although he came very close.

Burns and Allen, on the other hand, were radio stars who dabbled in the movies. At Paramount they were in eleven pictures in six years but in most of the films they were in support of huge casts. They were cast members in "College Humor," "International House," "The Big Broadcast of 1936" and "1937" etc. They managed to star in a couple films designed just for them but they never had a run-away hit. In 1939 Gracie made "The Gracie Allen

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Murder Case" without George, and went on to make a handful of films without her husband who finally blossomed into a full-fledged movie star in the 1975 film "The Sunshine Boys."

Perhaps Paramount's biggest disappointment was the failure of Jack Benny to capture movie star status. Benny made a string of mildly successful films at Paramount from 1936 to 1940 (including "Buck Benny Rides Again"), but he never drew the movie audiences expected and was never as funny on the screen as he was on the radio. His best film was undoubtedly "To Be Or Not To Be" directed by Ernst Lubitsch for United Artists. Jack Benny would eventually wind up at Warner Bros. and make a string of passable films with "The Horn Blows at Midnight" sounding the signal for him to generally retreat from movies.

The radio's happiest comedian was the movie's most popular clown. Red Skelton had had his own failed radio show in 1937 when he appeared as a guest on the Rudy Vallee radio show. The radio audience loved Red and RKO signed him for one film, "Having Wonderful Time." More stage and radio work followed and he signed a long term contract with MGM. After supporting roles in a couple of Dr. Kildare movies, Red made "Whistling in the Dark" and became a star of both radio and the movies. His great career is still in progress and hopefully will be for many years to come.

There were many other radio stars who made movies (the subject, perhaps, of another column) and the cross-over from radio to films was, in general, a successful step for many. The main consideration was that radio audiences were able to see their favorite radio personalities and, as a matter of fact, for any old time radio fan those films are priceless gems.

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