

FRED ALLEN: *Stopped By The Music*

BY TODD NEBEL

During the late 1940's a general uneasiness settled over the radio industry. Executives began worrying about the advent of television and its effects on radio, while ratings fell as more people bought television sets and became addicted to the new gadgets in their living rooms. Two developments during this period epitomized what was happening to network radio programming — and both affected the great radio comedian Fred Allen.

For fifteen seasons Fred Allen's Sunday night program on NBC had been one of the ten most highly-rated shows. In fact, during the 1947-1948 season, Allen's show was number one with a 28.7 Hooper rating to better all radio programs that year. But he had two problems.

Fred's first problem was more a public relation man's dream than anything else. One of Allen's key joke targets had been the many NBC vice-presidents. Allen noted that their job, "on finding a molehill on their desk in the morning, was to make

a good-sized mountain before they left that afternoon." Things came to a head, however, when Allen ran overtime on his April 27, 1947, show and his comment about NBC having a vice-president in charge of program ends — who "saved minutes and seconds of program time until he had two weeks worth, at which time he took a vacation" — was cut-off the air. The problem snowballed the following week when NBC cut-off Bob Hope and Red Skelton when each tried to joke about Allen's hassle. Newspaper stories and ads indicated that the ratings of all the affected programs were going up. It was a tempest in a small teapot, but the antagonism between Allen and NBC brass did not help him when later he was in trouble . . . with another problem.

In the late 1940's listeners were beginning to tire of most of the predictable lines and gags of many of the old radio comedy programs. Radio comedy, once the most popular form on the airwaves, was now competing against other types of programs. Drama shows, such as *The Lux Radio Theatre*, often had more listeners than comedy programs did. Quiz programs were becoming a broadcasting fad with winners receiving substantial prize money and lucrative prizes on such popular broadcasts as *Break the Bank* (1945), *The Bob Hawk Show* (1945), *Hit the Jackpot* (1948), *Chance of a Lifetime* (1949) and *Shoot the Moon* (1950). Ironically, the hosts of the quiz shows were often comedians looking for radio work. Phil Baker, Garry Moore and Eddie Cantor took turns as the master of ceremonies of

NOSTALGIA DIGEST AND RADIO GUIDE

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The NOSTALGIA DIGEST is published six times a year by THE HALL CLOSET, Box 421, Morton Grove, Illinois 60053. (708/965-7763).

Annual subscription rate is \$12 for six issues. A two-year subscription (12 issues) is \$22. Your subscription expires with the issue date noted on the mailing label. A renewal reminder is sent with the last issue of your subscription.

ADDRESS CHANGES should be sent to Nostalgia Digest, Box 421, Morton Grove, IL 60053 **AS SOON AS POSSIBLE**. The Post Office **does NOT** automatically forward the Digest which is sent by bulk mail.



FRED ALLEN

Take It or Leave It, Groucho Marx became the host of You Bet Your Life and Edgar Bergen starred on Do You Trust Your Wife?

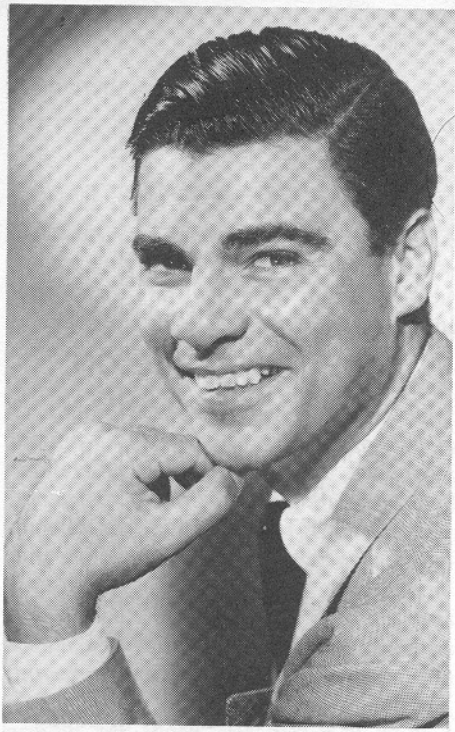
In 1948, ABC began Stop the Music, a national music quiz program starring Bert Parks. It placed telephone calls at random across the country. When a person answered, Parks would shout to the orchestra to "Stop the Music!" and the caller who could name the tune being played, won a big prize under the assumption that he or she had been listening to the program.

Therefore, thousands of families refused to leave their homes on Sunday night while the program was on. They were afraid if Stop the Music called they would probably lose a fortune. Many poor people had telephones installed hoping they would be called and eventually find themselves wealthy. Actually the contestants who were to be called during the program that

night were notified earlier that same afternoon. Millions of listeners, with high hopes, sitting around their radios at home were actually wasting their time. They were never going to be called.

ABC put Stop the Music opposite Fred Allen's Sunday night time slot with bad results as a consequence for the comedian. Fred's show dropped from the top ten to number 38 (or an 11.2 Hooper rating) while Stop the Music went to the number two slot within only a few weeks. Now, genuinely concerned about the effect of the competing show on his audience, Allen posted a \$5,000 bond to guarantee a prize to anyone listening to his program who missed an opportunity to answer a Stop the Music call correctly. He thought that if he could insure listeners, many of them might be convinced to listen to his show, knowing that they all the while would be protected financially.

ANNOUNCER: Ladies and Gentlemen! Stay tuned to the Fred Allen Show! For the



BERT PARKS

FRED ALLEN

next thirty minutes you are guaranteed, if you, any listener in the United States, are called on the telephone during the next thirty minutes by any give-away radio program, and because you are listening to Fred Allen, you miss an opportunity to win a refrigerator, a television set, a new car, or any amount of a cash prize, the National Surety Corporation guarantees that Fred Allen will perform his agreement to replace any article of merchandise up to a value of \$5,000 or reimburse you for any amount of prize money you may have lost, up to \$5,000. Notice of any claim under this agreement must be mailed to Mr. Fred Allen, by registered mail, care of the National Broadcasting Company, Radio City, New York, and postmarked no later than midnight, Monday, October 11, 1948. Relax! Enjoy the Fred Allen program! For the next thirty minutes you are protected under the terms of a guarantee bond covering all valid claims up to a total of \$5,000.

By the time of the deadline, there were

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several fake attempts to collect, but no genuine payoffs. Fred fought valiantly during the remainder of the 1948-1949 season, but now he was becoming increasingly bitter about the medium's insatiable appetite to devour talent. "When Stop the Music can give three iceboxes away instead of two and get listeners, its a silly business to be in anyway," he said in December, 1948.

The exhaustive process of broadcasting since 1932, and the incessant demands of creating and writing a weekly radio comedy program had affected his health, for he suffered from high blood pressure. It therefore was ill health and poor ratings which later forced Fred to relinquish his program; his last regular show said farewell with his old friend Jack Benny as guest on June 26, 1949. However, by now television was already becoming the country's new pastime. For example, with 172,000 television sets across the nation in 1948, by 1952 that number had jumped to 17 million! Listening to Jack Benny was no longer a Sunday night ritual and his ratings plummeted between 1948 and 1953. Bob Hope's ratings fell from 23.8 in 1948 to 12.7 in 1951 and by 1953 it was down to 5.4.

For Fred Allen, who made guest appearances on radio and television until his death in 1956, he would never again regain his earlier prominence. He did, however, live long enough to see the demise of network radio and was to later write in his autobiography, his mistakenly held belief that his humor would be forgotten: "Whether he knows it or not, the comedian is on a treadmill to oblivion. When a radio comedian's program is finally finished it slinks down memory lane into the limbo of yesterday's happy hours. All that the comedian has to show for his years of work and aggravation is the echo of forgotten laughter."

But, by 1992, Fred Allen has yet to be forgotten. ■