

Cover Story:

AMOS 'N' ANDY RADIO'S ALL-TIME FAVORITES

BY TERRY BAKER

"Amos 'n' Andy" began on radio in 1926 on station WGN in Chicago under the title "Sam 'n' Henry". The show was the idea of Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll who were hired by WGN after hearing them perform on another station in town, WEBH. WGN wanted them to dramatize a comic strip that was appearing in the Chicago Tribune at the time. Gosden and Correll thought a better idea would be to create a whole new show and they offered to do so. "Sam 'n' Henry" was the result.

After two successful seasons, Gosden and Correll moved to station WMAQ in Chicago but were informed that they couldn't take "Sam 'n' Henry" with them since WGN owned the rights to the name of the show. So the boys changed the characters' names and the show's setting and "Amos 'n' Andy" was born.

The show was about two black men who lived in Harlem and how they got through their daily lives. Gosden and Correll (who were white) had taken several years to perfect their black dialects and had done so well that many people listening didn't realize until later that the two actors portraying these roles were white.

While the characters being portrayed were black, "Amos 'n' Andy" was more than just a "minstrel show". The humor of the show came from the way "Amos 'n' Andy" dealt with life's experiences. People listening could relate to what "Amos 'n' Andy" were going through because they may have had similar experiences themselves. This type of humor

would have been funny regardless of the characters' race or color.

When Gosden and Correll moved to WMAQ they reached two important business agreements. Number one, they would own the rights to the show. In case the boys received another offer for their services they wanted to be sure that they could take "Amos 'n' Andy" with them.

The second part of the agreement allowed them to record the shows and sell them to other stations around the country. This primitive syndication process allowed some 30 stations to listen to their show instead of only one which not only increased the show's popularity but the boy's pocketbooks as well.

After a season on WMAQ and their small network of stations, the show was well known enough for NBC to offer Gosden and Correll a spot on the network schedule at \$100,000 a year. They quickly accepted the offer and began their network career on August 19, 1929 broadcasting "Amos 'n' Andy" for fifteen minutes a night, five times a week.

Early reviews of the show were not very encouraging. One New York critic called it "radio's biggest flop" and went as far as to say that "the show has no place on network radio." Other critics were just as unfavorable.

But these critics were mostly from large cities and didn't express the feelings of small town America. While critics may have thought "Amos 'n' Andy" a flop, middle America thought otherwise. There was something about the show that made people want to listen. Certainly it was different from any other program on the air. It combined the best elements of comedy and drama, leaving listeners on the edge of their seats and wanting to tune in the next day.

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"Amos 'n' Andy" was radio's first bonafide success story. A few other radio programs had achieved mild success up to that point but nothing that would compare with the fanatical following that "Amos 'n' Andy" inspired.

For those who weren't able to experience it firsthand, it is difficult to comprehend how large a following "Amos 'n' Andy" had.

Although ratings weren't very accurate at the time, it's estimated that roughly 40 million people listened in every night. Both Presidents Hoover and Roosevelt listened to the show regularly.

A large part of "Amos 'n' Andy's" success was that people listening *cared* what happened to the characters. Previous radio shows didn't depend on the audience taking an expressed interest in the performer. But "Amos 'n' Andy" was a show about life. Chances are if you didn't care about the characters then you didn't care about the show.

When developing the characters, Gosden and Correll made sure that "Amos 'n' Andy" expressed the values that most Americans still held dear. Amos Jones was the man with few faults. He was a hard-working, church-going man who was devoted to his wife and children. Andrew H. Brown on the other hand was rather on the lazy side but still deep-down an honest person. By extolling traditional American values "Amos 'n' Andy" had been able to attract that middle class audience which up to now had not been interested in what radio had to offer.

Another reason for the great success of the program was the stock market crash that came just two months after "Amos 'n' Andy" went on the air. With America deeply entrenched in a depression, people were trying to forget their problems and what better way to do so than to listen to the problems of others. "Amos 'n' Andy" was the only show at the time that dealt with life's troubles and thus became a focal point for all those Americans who were coping with problems of their own.

With so many people following the "Amos 'n' Andy" story it was up to Gosden and Correll to keep the quality of the show at a high level. They did not disappoint.

In the beginning the two performers did all of the voice characterizations. Gosden was Amos, Lightnin' (the janitor at the Mystic Knights of the Sea Lodge Hall where both Amos and Andy were members) and, later, the Kingfish. Correll provided the voice of Andy and fellow lodge hall member Henry Van Porter. Gosden and Correll also did all of their own writing but in later years as more characters were introduced additional actors and writers were added to help with production.

The majority of story lines would take place over three to four week periods. This gave Gosden and Correll

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a chance to enhance the dramatic tension a little bit each day until the story's conclusion.

They would thoroughly research topics the show would cover in order to give the program as realistic a feel as possible. A case in point is when Andy was about to get married. Gosden and Correll wanted to know how far a marriage ceremony could go without being legal.

After consulting with various lawyers and members of the clergy, they were assured that for a ceremony to be legal the couple had to be pronounced "man and wife." With that information the boys wrote a scene in which Andy's wedding went to the point where the preacher said "I now pronounce you" . . . , before the wedding was stopped. The next day millions of Americans wondered if Andy was married or not. Prominent lawyers and clergymen argued the point from both sides but the bottom line was that Andy remained single.

"Amos 'n' Andy" remained popular for several years but as America entered the mid 1930's the show's popularity, in fact radio's popularity as a whole, began to fall. America was slowly raising itself out of the depression and people started looking for other means of entertainment. Those same people that followed their show so closely for years were now deserting them for movies, plays and even other radio shows.

Radio had changed greatly from when "Amos 'n' Andy" first went on the air. When the depression hit, stars from vaudeville, movies and the stage came to radio to find work. It became increasingly difficult for "Amos 'n' Andy" to attract an audience against this kind of competition. All these stars would have announcers, orchestras and live audiences to give their programs a fast-paced style which fit the new mood of the country.

"Amos 'n' Andy" continued its decline throughout the late 30's and



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early 40's. Gosden and Correll knew that the show wouldn't last much longer unless they made some drastic changes. So in February of 1943 the last fifteen minute episode of "Amos 'n' Andy" was heard. In October of that year "Amos 'n' Andy" reappeared as a thirty minute once-a-week situation comedy.

The show now had an announcer, Harlow Wilcox (of Fibber McGee and Molly), an orchestra and chorus, and a live studio audience. In order to increase the comedy level of the show, Amos slowly became a background character. In his place came George "Kingfish" Stevens. The "Kingfish" was just about the most scheming character ever to hit radio. If there was any way to make an easy buck, he would find it. The show would usually revolve around Kingfish's life at home with his wife Sapphire and his weekly schemes to swindle money from Andy.

These changes did the trick as "Amos 'n' Andy" moved back to the top and remained there throughout the 40's.

As the 1950's approached, television loomed on the horizon. In 1948 CBS president William Paley was raiding the other networks of their performers in

anticipation of having these stars appear on his television network in the coming years. This way his network would have the early advantage when television surpassed radio in popularity.

"Amos 'n' Andy" was one of the shows to make the switch to CBS. Gosden and Correll got 2.5 million dollars for the move and in exchange they sold the rights to "Amos 'n' Andy" to CBS for 25 years. In addition, the boys promised to adapt "Amos 'n' Andy" to television. This proved to be an interesting dilemma.

Gosden and Correll could work behind the scenes of the show as producers, but they couldn't star in it for the obvious reason that they were white and the characters on the show were black. The search for just the right performers to play these roles had begun while they were still with NBC. It took four years but the roles were finally cast and "Amos 'n' Andy" made its television premiere on June 28, 1951.

The premise remained the same as it had been on radio. It usually dealt with the Kingfish and the various schemes he would pull on Andy while trying to cope with his problems at home. The Kingfish would frequently battle it out with his wife Sapphire (who was played by Ernestine Wade, the only performer to appear in both the radio and television series) and her interfering mama. Amos narrated most of the episodes and the rest of the time remained in the background as a secondary character.

It was a moderate success for two years but increasing pressures from black organizations who thought the show was insulting to blacks forced CBS to take it off the air in 1953.

Even while "Amos 'n' Andy" was on television, Gosden and Correll continued playing the roles on radio. The show continued as a situation comedy until 1954 when it became the "Amos 'n' Andy Music Hall". The boys would play hit records and perform short "Amos 'n'



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Andy" sketches between the songs. Eventually radio's dwindling audience caused "Amos 'n' Andy" to disappear from network radio on November 25, 1960.

In a sense "Amos 'n' Andy" had been in the right place at the right time. Just as Milton Berle did for television, "Amos 'n' Andy" did for radio. It made the medium more popular than most people thought possible. The show provided much needed laughter to the nation when all we had were problems and continued to bring us joy for some 31 years.

It's interesting to wonder if "Amos 'n' Andy" would have been as popular if the country hadn't fallen into a depression like it did. Probably not, although my view is that it still would have developed a strong following simply because it was different from all other shows at the time and also because it appealed to the average American family. Because of that, and the impact the show had on the nation as a whole, "Amos 'n' Andy" will always be considered radio's all-time favorite. □