

THE INCREDIBLE MAJOR

MAJOR BOWES HAS HARNESSED OUR NATIONAL APPETITE FOR ACTING

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It's a bit puzzling, on first meeting Major Edward Bowes, to decide whether you are looking at a churchman or the head of a prosperous money-lending agency. His manner is faintly pious; his eyes are as cold as a polar bear's paws.

Still, it's his nose that really gets you. It is a great, engulfing over-riding thing which makes Durante's look like a wem-ple. The man behind it is about 66. He has hair which is thin and vaguely orange in color, he is faultlessly dressed, gracious, suave. Perhaps the prime quality in the success of Major Bowes is the fact that he approached radio with stability of big business — he was already a big and successful business man in the theatrical world when radio came along — at a time when many of the large figures in radio had no such stability.

Amateur hours were not new when the Major blossomed into a front-page radio man with his amateur hour. It was an old theatrical stunt, but the Major had the foresight — or hindsight — to realize that here was a program potentiality already tried in the theater. It remained for Bowes to adapt it to the microphone in such a big way that it immediately captivated the imagination of every theatrically ambitious youngster or oldster in the country — and made it one of the most widely heard programs in radio.

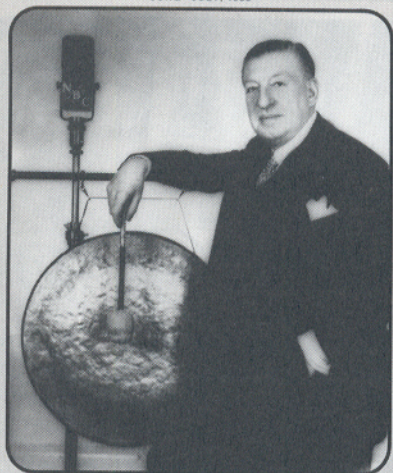
For years back Major Bowes was an American habit, something like the Sunday afternoon nap. Millions of people listened to him. His titles were many and diverse. He was honorary mayor of sixty-seven cities, honorary fire chief of fifty-seven cities, honorary police chief of fifty-one cities, honorary editor of thirty newspapers. In New Jersey he was honorary president of the Homing

Pigeons' Club. Ohio elected him a member of the Monday Afternoon Archery Society. The Ancient Order of Beekeepers, of Maryland, took him in and made him one of their own. In New York State he was honorary second-baseman of the Albany Baseball Club. He owned a stable of racing horses. He had three yachts, eight automobiles, four chefs. His salary was around \$430,000 a year, or roughly about a quarter of a million dollars greater than that of his radio sponsor, Walter P. Chrysler, the automobile manufacturer.

In Yoga philosophy the life-giving element is called prana. It is no exaggeration to say that amateurs have been Major Bowes' prana. Tens of thousands of amateurs have appeared on his program, most of them for just about four minutes. And without any noticeable theatrical talent of his own he has made them pay off. His voice just escapes being commonplace. He has a pleasant, smooth personality. Hundreds of small clergymen have the same. All things considered, Bowes' success is a curious and remarkable phenomenon which can be explained in part at least by something in the American people, the desire, perhaps equally curious, to see and hear aspiring youngsters make their first taut effort for recognition.

Major Edward Bowes is a San Francisco boy. He was born around the year 1876 into a relatively poor family. His father, a weigher on the docks, died when Bowes was a youngster, and the boy had to leave school and find a job. As a school-boy it happened that he was an uncommonly good penman and he turned this skill into money, writing fancily-trimmed greeting cards in the window of a San Francisco store. Later on he became a real-estate

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agent and made good at it. Still later he became one of a group which put up the Capitol Theatre, in New York. From its stage, in 1922, was broadcast the first radio program offered in a theatre.

The late Samuel F. Rothafel (Roxy) presided over these broadcasts from the Capitol Theatre until 1925, and when he left Bowes took over. He began his amateur hour in 1934 as a sideline. It became so popular that at one time about 300 amateurs a week were broke and stranded in New York City. In the early days, according to the Bowes office, 2,000 applications to appear were received every day.

According to several radio polls, the Major these days shows signs of being winded. Hooper ratings, compiled by C. E. Hooper, Inc., show that in the past two years Bowes' percentage of total listeners has dropped from 40.1 to 31.0. In the same period his average national rating dropped from 17.5 to 13.9.

Once there were fourteen of the highly-publicized Major Bowes units which travelled through the country winning scrolls and keys to cities, playing vaudeville and moving picture theatres. Now there are three. The amateurs themselves are the Major's sharpest critics. It is clear that not all of them could become stars, and nothing so embitters the ambitious as failure. Professionals have also been used in these units and the amateurs do not always stand up well by comparison. This is another source of resentment.

It is undoubtedly true that of the thousands of youngsters who have appeared on Bowes' programs, less than half a dozen have won any real success in show business.

Watching Bowes as he works with the amateurs Thursday nights, you are aware of no excessive warmth between him and the talent, no camaraderie, certainly no careless rapture. You are aware of an impersonal business man being impersonal at his business. He just misses being aloof. On the other hand there is probably no place for anything more than that. He is at least impartially impersonal. There is his medium smile for the amateur as he approaches the microphone, his well-done smile when the youngster has done his bit. The rare smile, according to radio legend, is for the photograph of Bowes and the amateur that goes out to the hometown newspaper.

In New York, in radio's inner circles, it is pretty generally thought that amateur hours — not necessarily Bowes' but all amateur hours — are on the way out. The war naturally makes all such speculation just that — speculation. The fickleness of public taste, in Bowes' case anyway, is discounted because of his reputation and following, and the fact that he has been a radio personality for close to twenty years, a record performance.