

# *Fred Allen's* **TREADMILL**

BY BILL OATES

To many self-professed media conscious viewers/listeners of the last decade of the twentieth century, the name Fred Allen means little. To those who understand and moreover appreciate "old time radio" this nasal New Englander represents comedy of the highest order, he was, in Bob Hope's words, "the comedians' comedian."

Fred Allen's name is often discussed in the same light as other great American wits, such as Mark Twain, Will Rogers, Robert Benchley, Groucho Marx or George S. Kaufman, all great satirists of American society who are remembered today, more or less. They not only shared an uncanny ability to satirize the foibles of modern man and woman in writing, but their humor is also represented on film and radio, most of which is readily accessible today. It was Rogers who told Allen that "as long as anything happens, we can make a living." Allen mastered several of the century's media, but is, unfortunately, less prevalent.

Fred Allen was born John F. Sullivan in Cambridge, Massachusetts on May 31, 1894. His childhood was not one nurtured in a stable family. His mother died when the future radio star was three years old, and his father, a perennial alcoholic, deposited the youth and his brother to the already crowded household of their Aunt Lizzie. Aunt Lizzie was remembered fondly the rest of Fred's days, and it was she who kept the boy on the straight and narrow.



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Since funds had to be collected for room and board, young John worked at many jobs. His longtime stint at the Boston Public Library gave him an appreciation for reading, time to experiment with juggling, his new hobby, and, of course, needed funds. Although he worked as a piano mover and on other jobs, he

continued off and on at the library for several years, and was given his first opportunity to perform his juggling act, with some jokes thrown in for good measure, for a library workers evening out. Though Aunt Lizzie objected to this new source of income (\$1 for his first paid gig), he continued improving his talent.

With more juggling practice and a desire for audience approval, newly named Freddie St. James was about to discover the long, steep road up the vaudeville ladder to the New York Palace. Much was learned from an aspiring juggler named Harry LaToy: show business good and bad, with LaToy frequently using the teenage "St. James" for his own monetary gains. Starting in 1911 at Sam Cohen's Hub Theater performing at amateur nights, the climb resembled this scenario: "The World's Worst Juggler" (now Freddie James) played Boston houses, then moved to New York ("12 minutes in one"), toured Australia in 1915, did Pantages "time" from 1917 to 1922 (he was not taken in World War I—sole support), joined the Lew Fields revue "Passing Show of 1922", played in the Shubert revue "Vogues" and "The Greenwich Village Follies" in 1924, until he played the Palace with teammate Bert Yorke in 1926. *Billboard* magazine favorably reviewed "The Disappointments of 1927" and lauded bogus emcee Allen who gave the "unbilled girl" in the cast more opportunities for laughs than himself.

Fred's name was acquired while touring with Pantages in 1917. LaToy thought the "Saint" in St. James gave class to the young Bostonian, but as the years progressed, Fred altered his name as his act changed and his publicity photos ran out. The Allen name came about because of a mistake. When Edgar Allen's last name was incorrectly placed after Fred's by the Fox Booking Office, he merely accepted his fate and ordered a new batch of photos.

With the changes in his moniker came an appreciation of American, Canadian



**FRED ALLEN hams it up  
with some cheese.**

and Australian vaudeville houses. Of particular note was his knowledge of Midwestern stages, especially in Illinois and Indiana. His attempt to revive this type of live theater in 1942 (the Orpheum circuit last ran in 1932) with fellow vaudevillian and Bostonian Jack Haley, reflected his love for this very challenging lifestyle. Many of the Allen's radio shows are likewise flavored with fondly remembered routines from this era of stage variety.

The move up the ladder to the pinnacle of vaudeville success was paved with many anecdotes. A good accounting will be found in Fred's autobiographical *Much Ado About Me* (the second of his life-story books) and the recently published *Fred Allen: His Life and Wit* by Robert Taylor. Among his stories include his two week substitute stint in "Artists and Models" in 1928, a shot at a big show, but his comedy couldn't compete (as he said) with the near nudes who were cavorting on stage.



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Other anecdotes include those of the starving comedian at Mrs. Montfort's boarding house in New York City and on the road in Australia during wartime preparations. He also mentioned small towns on the way out of Chicago (whose Palace was the second most prestigious place to play outside of New York), such as the split week he played in Terre Haute, including an eighteen hour show, before taking a midnight train to Evansville (a one hour ride with a four hour layover) to complete the other half week.

The friendships he established along the way were never forgotten. After becoming a star on radio, Fred Allen frequently dipped into his pocket to help less successful fellow vaudevillians (his generosity was fondly remembered after his death). He began a long-time friendship with Clifton Webb when he shared the stage in George S. Kaufman's comedy of manners skit "The Still Alarm" in the first "Little Show" in 1928.

Other struggling entertainers who were helped by the quietly generous Allen were Dave Garroway, Henry Morgan, Herb Shriner, Red Skelton (Fred wrote the famous Guzzler's Gin routine), and Steve Allen (Fred appeared on the young talk

show host's program to promote the opening of "The Benny Goodman Story" when he gave his last monologue.) It was at this time he met another long-time friend, and soon to be his wife, Portland (named for her birthplace in Oregon) Hoffa.

While Fred was on stage in the 1920's with the likes of Jack Benny, Burns and Allen, and W. C. Fields, radio was growing as an entertainment force in the world. After a number of big time stage successes, Fred was asked to star on *The Bath Club* for Linit in 1932 (it was soon renamed *Linit Revue*). The reviews were mixed (one reviewer in *Forum* called it a "hodge-podge of music and cracks by Allen"), but the public warmed up anyway. After a time on the air for Hellman's *Mayonnaise* in the *Salad Bowl Revue*, Sal Hepatica and Ipana toothpaste gave Fred a half hour each for their *Hour of Smiles* ("Ipana for the smile of beauty; Sal Hepatica for the smile of health.") Fred revealed later in his life that Bromo Seltzer had to stand in before the microphone for Sal Hepatica, because the latter's fizz was not loud enough. Eventually, Bristol Myers allowed their two sponsored halves to become sixty minutes of *Town Hall Tonight* in 1934. There would be a sponsor change to



PORTLAND HOFFA AND FRED ALLEN



**THE FAMOUS BENNY-ALLEN FEUD CONTINUES with this scene between Jack and Fred from the 1940 film, "Love Thy Neighbor."**

Texaco in 1940, when the show changed to a less taxing half hour, but the program returned to one full hour in 1941.

The year 1942 saw a return to the half hour format and to CBS, but more importantly, a new concept was introduced: Allen's Alley. Some of the characters in the "Town Hall" were removed to the Alley, and a comedy situation legend was born, as was the format that would take Fred to his last days on radio. So popular was Allen that, by 1941, his audience was estimated at over one in every three U.S. homes (20,000,000 total). Unfortunately, Fred was a workaholic and had to leave the air for months during the 1944-45 season because of high blood pressure.

The best remembered episodes of Fred's long career include the famous Benny-

Allen feud. Started in 1936, after Fred made a disparaging statement about Jack's violin abilities (in light of a youthful virtuoso being hailed on Fred's show), over a decade of radio slung barbs were launched. The climax came on March 14, 1937, when the "battle of the century" took place before a live audience in New York. The feud was not settled on that date, of course, and Benny continued to be the nemesis of Allen until the last days of *The Fred Allen Show*.

The comedian's gift of being able to observe and comment on man's shortcomings satirically was evidenced offstage as early as the 1920's when he contributed humor to *Variety* in his "Near Fun" column. New England characters on his radio shows, such as Titus Moody, became Fred's prize subjects for writing



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lines, a job assumed more by Fred than by other radio comedians. Photos of Fred show him "relaxing" by reading any daily paper he could (he had his favorite dailies mailed to him at 62 cents per copy), hence his ability to contribute to his own monologue with a thorough knowledge of all of the day's news and to other lines that he wrote for the program. When the hour-long shows were performed, Fred Allen seldom had time to enjoy the time between broadcasts, because the day after the show he was building material for the next.

He made a number of films, despite his dislike of leaving the East coast and falling into a "cinematic" form of entertainment. A *Life* magazine article titled "Fred Allen Tells Why He Hates Hollywood" jokingly toys with the rigors of getting up early, being made up, and engaging in the tortures of film making, but it really

reflects Fred's distaste for the trouble of going West to participate in the Hollywood style and usually an only modestly successful film.

Among his movies are "Thanks A Million" (he's Raymond Walburn's political manager in this 1935 Dick Powell vehicle), "Sally, Irene, and Mary" (he's their agent in this 1939 film), "Love Thy Neighbor" (feuding with Benny and introducing Mary Martin in 1940), and "It's in the Bag" (Eugene Petrov's "The Twelve Chairs", probably the best of Allen's films with a great 1945 cast.)

Certainly the golden age of radio for Fred was the late 1940's. He had not only mastered the art (as had many in the medium), but he also built upon his finely crafted format in Allen's Alley. The first continuing character developed was Falstaff Openshaw, whose name came from the odd combination of a Shakespearean character and a shipyard



KENNY DELMAR as Senator Beauregard Claghorn with Fred Allen.

worker Fred knew in Maine. The cast members just prior to Fred's illness leave included Charlie Cantor (Socrates Mulligan), Minerva Pious (Mrs. Nussbaum), and John Brown (John Doe), who all assumed jobs playing on, respectively, *Duffy's Tavern*, various parts, and on *The Jack Benny Show* when Fred was off the air in 1944. After his return there was some difficulty retrieving all of them, but Alan Reed (Falstaff) stayed, Everett Sloan was invited to join the cast, and Jack Smart returned to Allen after some years absence. The character receiving the most complaints was Ajax Cassidy. Fred's personal favorite was Titus Moody.

Announcer Kenny Delmar achieved perhaps one of the fastest nationwide rises to fame in radio when he introduced Senator Claghorn to the Alley on October 7, 1945. Based on a character Delmar met in the South in the announcer's formative years, the nonstop mouth and braggadocio of Claghorn helped spread the phrases "That's joke son" (also the title of Delmar's starring movie) and "... that is" like boll weevils in a cotton patch. Warner Brothers soon capitalized onto the character when they introduced Mel Blanc's voice as Claghorn's cartoon character Foghorn Leghorn two year later. Some publications of the day thought the phenomenon of the Senator would last six months at best, but when on the air the Senator received thousands of gifts and letters from Southerners who appreciated the revered profuse references to Dixie.

Fred Allen's last days on the radio were not pretty, at least for him personally. The show continued as successfully as it had been, but Fred, after being cut off when his show ran too long, satirized network vice presidents and portrayed them as useless know-nothings. Others at NBC, including Bob Hope and Red Skelton, jumped on the bandwagon, but it was Allen who was tossed out in the street and far from his alley forever, culminating in a suspension of contract.

The final undoing came when relative



**FRED ALLEN "charms" his CBS audience.**

upstart ABC introduced a game show opposite Fred in 1948. *Stop the Music* was a program that stopped a song and called a home to see if those on the receiving end were listening, and hence, would receive the jackpot. Fred joked about this at first, then offered \$5,000 to those who were called, but were listening to Allen's Alley. His ratings dropped, and the wounded executives found a chance to cancel *The Fred Allen Show*, the last of his 273 broadcasts occurring June 26, 1949 (faithful friend Jack Benny was his last guest.)

Fred Allen didn't make it in television for several reasons. First, finding the appropriate format was a problem. He was even offered a game show (*Judge for Yourself* from August 18, 1953 to May 11, 1954), but it allowed little chance for one of the most gifted wits of the day to perform with contestant straight men (Groucho Marx, on the other hand, mastered the art with the game show *You Bet Your Life*). Secondly, and it was

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considered, Allen's Alley was a beautiful place in the mind's eye of radio, but it would have been as difficult to present on a television as, say, Fibber McGee's Closet or Jack Benny's vault, although the cast was reunited in 1956 for an NBC thirtieth anniversary telecast.

Finally, he found an accommodating program too late. The guessing show *What's My Line* gave panelists a chance to toy with guests, if only briefly. Fred was closest to his best television character, but he died on March 17, 1956, and never fully realized the potential of the show. Perhaps his best triumph in television was as narrator for the *Project 20* documentary of "The Jazz Age," which was broadcast nine months after his death.

Steve Allen, who said he was frequently and proudly mistaken to be Fred's son, filled in for the next show and paid the radio comedian a tribute in his book *The*



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*Funny Men* mentioning that Fred Allen had been "unhonored by television."

The legacy of Fred Allen can best be sampled by listening to his genius on radio. The books by Allen and those about his era in entertainment attest to his abilities as a humorist of the top rung. In his own words, he felt as if he "was on a treadmill to oblivion," unable to "compete with the machine" (television).

Fred's comments on TV:

When you see Kukla, Fran, and Ollie come alive on the little screen, you realize you don't need great big things as we had in radio. They ought to get one of those African fellows over here to shrink all of the actors. We're all too big for this medium.

The trouble with television is it's too graphic (predictable). In radio, a moron could visualize things in his way, an intelligent man, his way.

Everything is for the eye these days . . . nothing is for the mind. The next generation will have eyeballs as big as cantaloupes and no brains at all.

Television is the triumph of equipment over people, and the minds that control it are so small that you could put them in the navel of a flea and still have enough room beside them for a network vice president's heart.

### Other Great Allen Quotes:

They had a scarecrow who scared crows so badly "that they brought back the corn they had stolen two years before."

On the price of milk in New York: "Milk hasn't been so high since the cow jumped over the moon."

When asked where Fred had learned juggling, Allen replied, "I took a correspondence course in baggage handling."

Fred was credited in 1927 with saying the immortal line to a rude house orchestra conductor, "How much would you charge to haunt a house?"

Comparing the new movie palaces to vaudeville houses: "Motion picture theaters were cathedrals that made vaudeville houses look like privies."

Henry Morgan asked why Steve Allen was laughing and he related that Fred had just told him he'd been at "dinner sponsored by the National Conference of Christians and Jews . . . do we really deserve top billing?"

Asked why he was leaving New York City, Fred said, "I'm going to Boston to see my doctor. He's a very sick man."

In discussing geometry: "Let X equal the signature of my father."