

BEST CALL FOR BREAKFAST

Don McNeill's Breakfast Club

BY JOHN DUNNING

The Breakfast Club was a show that couldn't give away a commercial spot during its first six years, but it left an undeniable imprint on the development of morning broadcasting.

Born in the depths of the Depression, the show combined just the proper amounts of Midwestern corn, unabashed sentiment, audience participation, and old fashioned music and song to please the eardrums of middle America. As many entertainers discovered, that was a sure-fire road to overnight fame and fortune.

For Don McNeill, the fame arrived somewhat later than overnight, but the fortune — when it came — was well worth the wait. During the three-and-a-half-decade run of his *Breakfast Club*, McNeill watched his salary soar from \$50 a week to more than \$200,000 a year. He saw the show develop from a white elephant that the network kissed off as hopeless into one of the great blockbusters of the morning air, costing each of its four regular sponsors \$1 million a year.

And yet, the show that bowed out on December 27, 1968, didn't differ radically from the premiere of June 23, 1933. The main difference was that McNeill wanted to take a fond look backward.

The corn element always ran rampant through the fabric of the show. Perhaps that was its greatest charm, and the secret of its long success. McNeill made no bones of the fact that he was just a country boy at heart. Born December 23, 1907, in Galena, Illinois, he had abandoned early ambitions to be an editorial cartoonist, and had leaped into radio during the wild 1920's. He teamed with Van Fleming, a singer he met while work-

ing in Louisville, and the two sang at West Coast stations under the name "Don and Van, the Two Professors." They split up the act when money ran out and bookings looked slim. McNeill headed east. In 1931, he married Kay Bennett, a college classmate, and they went to New York together to chase a career in big-time radio.

But New York could be a frustrating town, and eventually the McNeills returned to Chicago. He auditioned for a job opening at NBC Blue, as master of ceremonies of a sagging early morning show called *The Pepper Pot*. It paid \$50 a week, and the main fringe benefit was that McNeill could run it any way he wanted. Network executives were still writing off the early hours as dead time so it really didn't matter much what McNeill did with it. It turned out that he transformed a sagging Blue Network show into one of the most dynamic offerings of the early-morning air.

The first change McNeill made was in the title. The *Pepper Pot* became *The Breakfast Club*, and the show was envisioned as developing in four stages. These were termed "the four calls to breakfast."

The program was broadcast from Chicago. First heard on June 23, 1933, it became one of the longest-running shows in network history. McNeill personally wrote the scripts for about two months. After that he began using short pieces of folksy humor sent in by his listeners. His wife — one of his most important critics — thought the show went better that way. McNeill asked for permission to run *The Breakfast Club* without a script. Network brass still didn't care, and the



DON MC NEILL

show eased into the spontaneous, unrehearsed format that would serve it for the next thirty-four years.

McNeill's gang of Breakfast Clubbers changed with the times, but several members asked almost as long as the host. In the early months, Jim and Marian Jordan (later famous as Fibber McGee and Molly) played a couple called Toots and Chickie. Bill Thompson first tried out his "Wallace Wimple" voice on *The Breakfast Club*. Other people passing through on their way to new careers were Jan Davis (later of *Arthur Godfrey Time*) and Alice Lon, who would make her mark as one of Lawrence Welk's Champagne Ladies.

Homer and Jethro practiced their corn, Johnny Desmond was a singing Johnny-on-the-spot, and Patsy Lee talked wistfully of her hope chest on McNeill's show. Gale Page and the Merry Macs also used *The Breakfast Club* as a stepping stone to bigger things: semi-regulars over the years included Mildred Stanley, Jack Baker ("The Louisiana Lark"), Jack Owens, Nancy

Martin, Marion Mann, Betty Olson and Floyd Holm.

But to others the show became a career.

Cliff Petersen joined the cast in 1936 as part of a singing trio called The Escorts and Betty. He graduated to the role of producer-director.

Eddie Ballantine, a trumpet player with the original Walter Blaufuss orchestra, eventually took over the baton himself.

Sam Cowling, a paunchy, durable comedian, joined the show in 1936 and became master of the one-liner. His "fiction and fact from Sam's Almanac" was an established part of the show.

Finally there was Fran Allison, who played the gossipy spinster Aunt Fanny. As a "Clubber," Miss Allison relayed tales of her countrified neighbors (Ott Ort, Bert and Bertie Beerbower, the Smelers), but she became best known outside *The Breakfast Club*, as Fran on the TV show *Kukla, Fran and Ollie*.

The show opened with a bang, to this snappy theme from the salad days of 1944:



SAM COWLING and FRAN ALLISON

BREAKFAST CLUB

*Good morning, Breakfast Club-bers
It's time to sing ya
Another cheery greeting,
So may we bring ya:
Four — calls — for break-fast!
Kellogg's — call — to break-fast!
So every Breakfast Club-ber
Young and old,
Come and join our hap-py
Care-free fold;
Yes, wake up, Breakfast Club-bers,
And smile a-while;
A day begun with Kellogg's
Makes' life worth-while!*

Every 15 minutes, there was a “call to breakfast,” done with a drum roll, whooping, and a trumpet fanfare. The cast joined McNeill for a “march around the breakfast table,” which sometimes continued up the aisles of the broadcast studio. Later in the show came “Memory Time,” when McNeill dipped into the mailbag for a piece of nostalgic poetry contributed by a listener. Other well-remembered features were “The Sunshine Shower” (requests by McNeill for listeners to write to people confined in

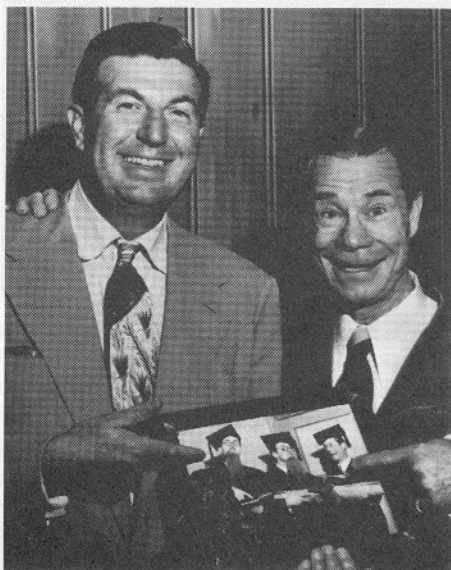
nursing homes, hospitals, and orphanages); and “Prayer Time,” a nonsectarian appeal to the Maker, culminated by McNeill’s 15 seconds of silent prayer:

*All over the nation,
Each in his own words,
Each in his own way;
For a world united in peace,
Bow your heads and let us pray.*

“Prayer Time” was first heard during the broadcast of October 28, 1944, and was conceived as a comfort for families with sons serving in the war. But it became such an established part of the show that McNeill kept it even after the war ended. He was especially responsive to such requests from listeners, and was fond of saying that *The Breakfast Club* was really written by the audience. “I just found that the folks who listen in can write this show a whole lot better than I can,” he said in a 1950 *Colliers* article. More than one million pieces of mail came in each year, and the heart of *The Breakfast Club* developed right out of the mailbag. Gags, verse, and regional anecdotes were all grist for McNeill’s mill. Interspersed with songs and interviews, the mail filled out the hour, and kept the show moving at a comfortable pace.

Guest stars were used, though sparingly, and they soon joined the spontaneous mood. Breakfast Clubbers still remember the morning when Jerry Lewis set fire to a commercial script as McNeill was reading it, creating such pandemonium that announcers nationwide missed their regular station cues.

Just as unpredictable were the people from the studio audience, chosen by McNeill from the interview cards passed out before the show. One morning in 1949, he brought an 11-year-old boy to the microphone. After the interview, young Bernie Christianson asked McNeill’s permission to sing a few bars



DON MC NEILL and JOE E. BROWN



GOOD MORNING, BREAKFAST CLUBBERS — Look closely and you'll see Breakfast Club host Don McNeill interviewing guest Henry Fonda during a broadcast of the popular morning show in 1957.

of "Galway Bay" for his grandparents. The boy's voice was electrifying, stirring the audience to a two-minute ovation. Bernie was brought back as a "Breakfast Club" regular during the next year.

Best-known of the show's regulars were the members of McNeill's own family. Wife Kay appeared often; sons Tom, Don, and Bobby also turned up occasionally. For many years the family participated in a Christmas-season holiday show. Once a year McNeill took *The Breakfast Club* on tour for a month. By then his closing line — "be good to yourself" — had become nationally familiar.

The Breakfast Club was brought to TV in a simulcast on February 22, 1954. But McNeill wasn't able to cope with the

camera, and it bombed. There would still be radio, for a little while yet, and *The Breakfast Club* would hang in there till the end, establishing a long distance record that few shows of any kind could equal. With few changes in style of format, it ran for more than thirty-five years, broadcasting its finale December 27, 1968. ■

(ED. NOTE — This Breakfast Club article originally appeared in Tune In Yesterday, The Ultimate Encyclopedia of Old Time Radio, 1925-1976 and is reprinted here by permission of the author, John Dunning, who is presently working on an enlarged and revised edition of the book, to be published by Oxford University Press, hopefully by 1994.