

# A DECADE OF RADIO

By B. ERIC RHOADS

The Great Depression began with the stock market crash of 1929, which set the tone for the early '30s. America was without jobs and money. All unnecessary spending in the average household came to a halt -- except radio.

Radio was booming in spite of the Depression. Perhaps it was because people could get their entertainment for free without purchasing tickets to the theater for a motion picture or a play. Perhaps the curiosity about radio and the momentum was so strong, nothing could kill it. If there was one purchase to be made, it was a radio set, something every home felt it had to have.

Yet, in 1931, listener boredom set in. America's top program, Amos and Andy, had seen its high water mark, and it began to lose listeners. Listener losses soon translated into revenue losses, which had to cease.

This sudden drop forced the networks to invent a new type of programming -- the dramatic series. NBC looked to litera-

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*B. Eric Rhoads is author of A Pictorial History of Radio's First 75 Years, recently published by Streamline Press. This article is reprinted from that book with permission. Mr. Rhoads, of Palm Beach Country, Florida, is publisher of the trade magazine Radio Ink and participates in the ongoing preservation of radio history as a steering committee member of the Radio Hall of Fame. A Pictorial History of Radio's First 75 Years (460 9 x 11 pages, hardcover) is available for \$34.95 plus tax from Metro Golden Memories in Chicago at 1-800-538-6675.*

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## The THIRTIES

ture and film for established characters, launching programs like The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes and Rin-Tin-Tin Thrillers. New forms of a dramatic series were created, incorporating romance, comedy, and mystery. This spawned programs like The Eno Crime Clues, The Shadow, The First Nighter Program, With Canada's Mounted and numerous others.

In spite of these efforts, radio listening declined. The only programs that seemed to survive were those featuring big-name established talent from the stage and the movies. The Rudy Vallee Show was one of the few that maintained huge success, built on the strength of its celebrity guests and Vallee himself.

The signal was clear. In order to keep the interest of advertisers, network executives had to get bigger talent in order to maintain listener interest in radio, so that's just what they did. Stars like Eddie Cantor and Ed Wynn were given their own programs. Radio saw a huge surge in popularity, with acts like George Burns and Gracie Allen, George Jessel, Fred Allen and Portland Hoffa, The Marx Brothers, Jack Benny, Mary Livingston, Eddie "Rochester" Anderson, Mel Blanc, Joe "Wanna Buy A Duck" Penner, Stoopnagle and Budd, and Jack Pearl.

Vaudevillians were given programs of their own, many of whom were great on stage but didn't seem likely to work on radio because of their visual acts. Yet radio grew with visual acts such as tap dancers, ventriloquists and even dog acts. Radio



**FREEMAN GOSDEN and CHARLES CORRELL as AMOS 'N' ANDY**

comedy soared in the '30s. In spite of its decline, Amos and Andy was so strong it became an industry unto itself, with candy bars, toys, comic books and phonograph records. They proved that comedy on the radio was appealing and set the stage for

more comedy acts to fill the airwaves with laughter

Leading the way was comedian Eddie Cantor, who held more than 50 percent of the listening audience. Comedy skits became the best way to keep the programs interesting from week to week.

There were also those like Will Rogers and James Thurber who used humor in their philosophy and political commentary. Rogers especially liked to target President Roosevelt, "The Houdini of Hyde Park," and his New Deal for America. Along with the surge in comedy talent came a vast array of talented singers like Al Jolson, Ruth Etting, Gertrude Niesen and Bing Crosby.

The craze for amateur programming began in 1934 with the introduction of Major Bowes' Original Amateur Hour. Talent scouts roamed America looking for the next big stars to come on the show to win prizes, and possibly fame. The show received 10,000 talent applications per week. It became one of the top shows but spawned very few national successes. One of those discovered was Frank Sinatra, who ap-



**COMEDIAN JOE PENNER AT REHEARSAL WITH ACTRESS GAY SEABROOKE**

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peared with the Hoboken Four.

Before long the concept was airing on all the networks in one form or another and remained popular until about 1937, when quiz shows began to gain huge popularity. They included Professor Quiz, Kay Kyser's College of Musical Knowledge, Beat the Band, Spelling Bee, Cab Calloway's Quizzical, It Pays To Be Ignorant, Ben Bernie's Musical Quiz and Can You Top This? Pot o' Gold became one of the highest-rated quiz shows because of its huge cash prizes.

The '30s began a new age for radio, which now offered a huge variety of programs ranging from quiz shows and news programs to soap operas, melodramas, westerns and detective shows. Radio became the great escape from the problems of the Depression.

The demand for radio programming was high. Some of the hottest shows were the dramatic programs like True Romances and Redbook True Story. Additionally, the romantic comedies like The First Nighter Program, Real Folks, Grand Central Station and Curtain Time became popular.

But Hollywood still held the biggest fascination with the public, and the big-name talent brought the biggest audiences. Shows like Hollywood Hotel, Talkie Picture Time and D. W. Griffith's Hollywood were huge. Each incorporated major talent or gossip about Hollywood's biggest

stars. Hedda Hopper, Louella Parsons, Jimmy Fidler and Walter Winchell satisfied an appetite for information and gossip about Hollywood.

Perhaps the biggest and best-known program to incorporate Hollywood's biggest stars was Lux Radio Theatre. The program reenacted dramatic scripts using

Hollywood's top names, like Cary Grant, Clark Gable, Humphrey Bogart, James Cagney, Jimmy Stewart, Katharine Hepburn, Helen Hayes, Myrna Loy, Claudette Colbert and hundreds of others. The show was hosted by legendary film director Cecil B. DeMille.

After the success of Lux Radio Theatre, copycat programs like Warner Academy Theater, Cavalcade of America, Silver Theatre

and The Screen Guild Theatre emerged. None was as successful as the originator of the concept.

Serious drama also emerged in the '30s, with Shakespearean plays, Tolstoy and other literary works adapted for radio. This attracted a breed of high-brow theater actors and actresses who were often considered above doing films or radio. A breakthrough came in the mid-'20s when Ethel Barrymore, one of the top stage actresses, took the forbidden step into a radio studio. This allowed stage players to consider radio acceptable, although most still shied away from the garish world of Hollywood films.

In 1936, The Columbia Workshop



**BING CROSBY**

emerged as another important vehicle for serious works. CBS brought acclaimed writers like Dorothy Parker, Archibald MacLeish, James Thurber and others into radio, creating many radio classics.

One of the most memorable moments of The Columbia Workshop years was a young poet by the name of Norman Corwin. His captivating writing style exposed radio audiences to the classic arts of poetry and literature. He created many memorable radio plays, such as "The Plot To Overthrow Christmas" and "The Pursuit of Happiness." Corwin emerged as the greatest radio director and writer of all time.

Perhaps the pinnacle of radio drama was the Halloween broadcast of Orson Welles' "The War of the Worlds" on October 30, 1938, on Mercury Theater. His enactment of the H.G. Wells play sent fear through households across America, causing panic and hysteria. Even though disclaimers aired at the start and end of the program, people reacted to the supposed invasion. For months following the broadcast, Welles was chastised by the press for the re-creation.

The event took a third-rate program into the top ratings slot and elevated the young Welles to major star status. It also demonstrated the power of radio. After all, Mercury Theater was not a highly rated program, yet with the listeners it had, the broadcast caused a severe panic.

With the huge number of stations on the

air in the '30s, many were left with programming voids if unable to affiliate with NBC's Red or Blue Networks (there was also an Orange and a White network from NBC), or with CBS.

This left openings for new entries, and in 1934 The Mutual Broadcasting System was formed by pooling several large stations like WGN, Chicago; WXYZ, Detroit; WOR, New York, and WLW, Cincinnati, as sources for programming, along with the Don Lee Network on the West Coast. By 1938, Mutual already had secured 110 affiliates.

Even comedian Ed Wynn thought he could get into the act. He founded his own network -- Amalgamated Broadcast System --acquired 100 affiliates and was bankrupt nine

months later. In the meantime, CBS and NBC had become giants and names like NBC's David Sarnoff and CBS' William Paley were gold on Wall Street. NBC began building Radio City in the heart of New York and Hollywood, with new studios in Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit and several cities. CBS, too, broke ground for new facilities like Columbia Square in Hollywood, a massive facility to house West Coast network programming.

Control of programming content did not rest with the networks as much as the public believed. In reality, it was the advertisers pulling the strings. At least 33 percent of all radio programs were produced by advertising agencies, and talent contracts



ORSON WELLES

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were often with the agencies themselves and not the networks.

Rudy Vallee, for instance, was an employee of J. Walter Thompson, the agency for Standard Brands. In fact, unemployed actors applied at the agencies, as did producers with new program concepts. The sponsors had the power, ranging from script approval to guest stars and success or failure of a program, no matter how much the networks liked or disliked it.

In fact, radio premiums were invented to track listening. If a program or star could generate a lot of mail requesting the free premium, the program was considered highly rated.

Audience ratings first came on the scene in 1930, when WLW, Cincinnati, owner Powel Crosley created the C.A.B. (Cooperative Analysis of Broadcasting). The station telephoned listeners in 30 cities, asking them to name programs heard that day. Interestingly, the same simple ratings procedure is still used today.

The "Hoopers" created by C.E. Hooper became the standard starting in 1935 and maintained dominance until A.C. Nielsen bought the company out in 1949.

Ratings afforded agencies information beyond asking listeners to mail in requests for premiums. They became the sole criteria by which programs were judged. Even the most popular programs were canceled if the ratings showed their popularity diminishing. About the only programs not sponsored and ratings-sensitive were educational programs, news programs and The Columbia Workshop.

For years, program commercialization was looked upon by some as downright inappropriate for the radio. At one time, the president created a commission to study the effects of commercials, and the effect of radio in general on the listening public.

What they found was an increase in interest in sports, enrollment in colleges with active sports teams with radio broadcasts and increased interest in the climates of California and Florida.

Most importantly, it was found that radio had improved communication to the American people, and had developed a national community of sorts. Most recognized was that radio listening had become the second-highest activity, second only to sleeping.

Toward the decade's end, radio no longer relied on bringing big stars to the radio dial to create radio listening; radio had made its own stars who did not come from Broadway, Hollywood or vaudeville.

People like Kate Smith ("the Songbird of the South"), Fannie Brice and Arthur Godfrey were household names whose careers were made from radio.

Radio also elevated the spirits of America with music, and the end of the decade brought with it a new way of hearing music: the record. Make Believe Ballroom, invented in Los Angeles by Al Jarvis and perfected in New York by Martin Block, brought a way to hear variety without having the artists make live appearances. These programs gained vast popularity, and Jarvis and Block were immortalized as the first disc jockeys.

But music wasn't only coming from discs. A new form of music called "swing" had emerged as a nation jitterbugged across the dance floors of ballroom broadcasts. Bands like Tommy Dorsey, Duke Ellington, Benny Goodman and Glenn Miller popularized programs like Your Hit Parade.

For the first time in history, radio was having an enormous impact on record sales as teens and young adults flocked to record stores for the latest recordings.

Radio brought attention to Washington, and in return Washington realized the value

of radio in the '30s. Franklin D. Roosevelt was said to have been elected because of his great radio speaking voice, while his opponent had a horrible radio presence.

FDR was the radio president. His was the first inauguration ever heard on radio. He understood the power of the medium, and he knew how to work it to his advantage, gaining support for his "New Deal." Roosevelt

was the first president to regularly use radio when he introduced his Fireside Chats, each of which began with the words: "My dear friends ..."

The '30s also saw the beginning of the serious broadcast journalist, as newsmen Lowell Thomas, H.V. Kaltenborn, Gabriel Heatter and Graham McNamee described such events as the Hindenburg disaster, the abdication of Edward VIII, the kidnapping of Charles Lindbergh Jr, the election and reelection of FDR and the start of World War II. For the first time in history, people were able to hear a war unfold before their eyes as foreign correspondents gave detailed accounts of every move.

As the '30s were ending and the country was coming out of the throes of the Depression, radio was an important part of life. Radio had become the main form of entertainment in America, and other me-



KATE SMITH

dia were reacting.

Movie theaters had to schedule movies at different times so they would not start until the top radio shows were over; otherwise, they had empty theaters.

Newspapers, many of which also owned radio stations, were doing their best to bring the medium to its knees. They were in a difficult position, because they could bring readership to

their papers by printing radio listening guides, yet they were losing advertising dollars to radio. The newspaper publishers association met for the express purpose of developing a strategy to lessen radio's competitive threat to the loss of advertising dollars, a banner they have carried with them to the present day.

In a short 20 years, radio became the most powerful advertising and selling vehicle in the world. The radio was the most important piece of furniture in the home, and for some the most expensive. Big, high-quality radio sets became a status symbol, some costing more than automobiles.

The social structure of America had changed as radio brought families around the radio for their news, music, comedy, drama and their children's education. Radio had become a lifestyle. ■