

'How are ya, how are ya?'

# Remembering Arthur Godfrey

BY BILL ELWELL

What comes to mind when you hear the name "Arthur Godfrey"? I remember a pleasant, relaxed voice that reached out in a personal way . . . an average guy who made good but kept his feet on the ground . . . a man who poked good-natured fun at commercials he read . . . a person who could be trusted.

When I reflected on these memories recently, it suddenly occurred to me that they were based on impressions received some forty years ago while listening to radio or watching television. And, the more I thought about this, the more I wondered.



ARTHUR GODFREY

-2- Nostalgia Digest

What was really behind the friendly voice on radio and the smiling face on television? How did Godfrey become a star for CBS? And what became of him afterward?

I looked for answers to these questions and found a fascinating story. It is one well worth sharing, for the real Arthur Godfrey was much more than an average guy.

Arthur was born 90 years ago on August 31, 1903, in New York City. He lived a normal childhood there and, in time, became the oldest of five children.

Arthur's father earned a marginal living as a reporter for the New York Times, so there were periods when money was scarce. Consequently, as the family grew larger, so did its financial problems.

In 1915, the Godfreys moved to Hasbrouck Heights, New Jersey. While there, the family's poverty worsened, and at times the evening meal was a bowl of oatmeal.

Conditions deteriorated further when Arthur's father was stricken with cancer. His mother, an accomplished pianist, tried to support the family by playing for Pearl White thrillers at local movie houses. Arthur supplemented family income with earnings from his paper route.

While in high school, Arthur found work in a bakery. After his employer died, Arthur skipped school frequently to keep the business going. Because of these absences, the school principal punished young Godfrey. On the eve of the big freshman-sophomore debate, the



principal told him he could no longer be captain of the sophomore team.

Godfrey was outraged and quit school. He also left home to lighten the burden on his family. Thus, at the age of 15, Arthur headed back to New York City with a shirt, a pair of pants, two leaky shoes, and 35 cents in his pocket.

Times were hard when Godfrey arrived in New York. He survived, however, by working at various odd jobs for about a year and then began looking elsewhere for employment.

For the next two years, Godfrey tramped from one end of the country to the other and did whatever work was available to the young and inexperienced. During that time, he was employed as a coal miner, tire maker, dishwasher, lumberjack, farmer, and truck driver.

In 1921, Godfrey sought more steady work and joined the Navy. He spent most of the next three years aboard a destroyer as a radio operator. While in the Navy, he learned to play the banjo and began thinking about show business. He also took his first ride in a stuttering old airplane and became interested in fly-

ing. At the end of his tour, Godfrey decided to leave the service and resumed job-hopping.

Arthur found work selling cemetery lots in Detroit and was an instant success. He was a natural salesman and soon saved \$10,000, a small fortune in those days.

One day Godfrey learned of a traveling vaudeville act originating in Chicago and made a decision. He stopped selling cemetery lots, put his savings into the act, and toured the country with it. Unfortunately, the act went bankrupt in Los Angeles, and Godfrey was forced to ride the rails back to Chicago.

Godfrey took up taxi driving to support himself in Chicago. Then, one day in 1927, a former shipmate stepped into his cab. During the ride, he persuaded Godfrey to give up his job and join the Coast Guard.

On an evening in 1929, when Godfrey was stationed with the Coast Guard in Baltimore, he was listening to a local talent show, *Saturday Night Function*, broadcast by NBC station WFBR. The station manager was unable to get enough performers and invited talented listeners to come in and try their luck.

Arthur picked up his banjo, went to the station, and was put on the air. He won that night's contest and was offered a program of his own.

Godfrey wanted the job but could not accept the offer while he was in the Coast Guard. According to one story, the problem was solved by the Governor of Maryland. Apparently, Godfrey had done some work for him, so he helped Godfrey obtain a release from the service.

Initially, WFBR paid Godfrey \$5 per show in a playing-singing-talking format for a local pet shop account. He did such a fine job with his pleasant, humorous, and relaxed manner that the station manager promoted him to announcer. By 1930, Godfrey was a regular at

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WFBR. Later that year, he moved to WRC, the NBC station in Washington, D.C.

Godfrey had maintained his interest in flying over the years and, while in Washington, arranged to take glider lessons. Around noon on September 26, 1931, he was driving to a lesson at an airport outside of Washington when an oncoming truck veered into his path and collided head-on with him. The impact was so powerful that the truck's engine wound up in the passenger seat of Godfrey's car.

The two men in the truck were thrown out, landed in bushes, and received a few scratches. Godfrey was less fortunate. He was crushed and not expected to live, but he did.

Godfrey was immobilized in the hospital for five months. While there, he spent much time listening to the radio



**SINGER JEANETTE DAVIS** rehearses a song with her boss, **ARTHUR GODFREY**.

and decided most of what he heard, especially the advertising, was worthless. Announcers read prepared material and used artificial mannerisms. Moreover, they appealed to groups of people, instead of one typical person, and were not convincing.

Godfrey discovered a principle of successful advertising, and it was a major turning point in his life. He decided he would talk over the radio to "one guy" in an imaginary audience. And he would speak with that person as though the two of them had sat down for an informal chat.

When Godfrey returned to work, he tried out his new approach. His innovative style plus his relaxed, pleasant manner soon brought him widespread attention and built a friendly link with listeners. Station management, however, disapproved and strongly discouraged him, especially whenever he put down advertising. Even so, Godfrey kept at it.

One of Godfrey's sponsors was Zlotnik, a respected Washington furrier. Zlotnik had placed a stuffed polar bear in front of the store, and Godfrey described it over the air as a dirty white bear and a moth-eaten fugitive from Noah's ark. Listeners loved it, and business boomed for Zlotnik.

Godfrey supplemented his new approach with disc-jockeying, but his bosses at NBC still did not like his style. As a result, one day in late 1933, when he missed the beginning of his program, they decided it was time for Godfrey to leave.

Early the following year, Godfrey was hired as an announcer by the CBS station in Washington, WJSV, which later became WTOP. Thus began his association with CBS that lasted nearly 40 years.

Godfrey was put into an all-night slot where he played records and chatted with "one guy" in an imaginary audience. Soon sales of Godfrey-advertised products began to pick up.



**"TOO FAT TRIO" PLUS ONE** — Arthur Godfrey is joined by (from left) clarinetist Johnny Mince, bandleader Archie Blyer, and trombonist Sy Shaffer in a chorus of Arthur's big record hit, "Too Fat Polka."

Aviation continued to be a big part of Godfrey's life. He had been patched up enough after his accident in 1931 to continue flying and was able to obtain a private pilot's license in 1934.

In July of that year, Godfrey hired Margaret "Mug" Richardson to be his "Girl Friday". Mug, who had recently won the title of "Miss North Carolina," initially worked as Godfrey's secretary and bookkeeper. Later, she gathered letters, notes, poems, and clippings from newspapers and magazines and handed them to him to read while he was on the air. In time, she also acted as a buffer between Godfrey and writers and salesmen who wanted to reach him.

Godfrey wanted to transfer to New York City, but CBS officials considered him mainly a "local boy" and felt his appeal on a nation-wide hookup was

questionable. Then Walter Winchell, well-known radio commentator and newspaper columnist, heard Godfrey's show in Washington and gave him rave notices. He also urged CBS executives to bring Godfrey to the network's headquarters. Arthur did get a brief opportunity on a network show, but the program failed badly.

In 1941, Godfrey's luck began to improve. Station WABC, an affiliate in New York that later became WCBS, began carrying his Washington show in greater New York. Then, in 1942, Godfrey came to New York to announce for Fred Allen on the *Texaco Star Theatre*. He was so popular that audiences applauded when they heard his name.

Godfrey left the show after six weeks but continued his morning broadcasts

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from Washington and New York. He also appeared as a free-lancer on various CBS programs and continued looking for a national slot.

During World War Two, Godfrey wanted to fly for the Navy but was turned down because of disabilities resulting from his accident in 1931. However, Eleanor Roosevelt, the wife of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, listened to Godfrey on Washington radio and learned of his problem. She brought the matter to her husband's attention, and the President ordered the Navy to give Godfrey a commission.



FRANK PARKER and MARION MARLOW

In April 1945, Godfrey was assigned as the network's special reporter for the funeral of President Roosevelt. He still felt indebted to the late President because of his help with the Navy.

Godfrey's coverage of the event was moving and sincere. When he began to describe the solemn procession with its riderless horse and the caisson bearing the President's casket, he broke down and wept. Nevertheless, Godfrey stayed with it and continued to speak through his tears. It was a remarkable moment.

On April 30, after threatening to leave CBS and rejoin NBC, Godfrey was finally booked into the CBS morning line-up. His network show, *Arthur Godfrey Time*, was on the air five days a week.

Godfrey's approach was folksy and appealing, and he introduced a cast of singers and musicians. By referring to their personal lives during broadcasts, he made them more interesting to the audience.

The use of live talent instead of records gave birth to the "Little Godfreys." These individuals formed a tight little group that remained with Godfrey. Over the years, it included such personalities as Frank Parker, Marion Marlowe, the McGuire Sisters, Pat Boone, the Chordettes, Janette Davis, Bill Lawrence, and Julius La Rosa.

On July 2, 1946, CBS also signed Godfrey to a weekly nighttime show, *Arthur Godfrey's Talent Scouts*. It was soon among the top twenty shows.

By 1948, Godfrey was a listening institution. A year later, he was also on television with two hit evening presentations: *Arthur Godfrey and His Friends* and *Arthur Godfrey's Talent Scouts*. Another radio program, *Arthur Godfrey's Digest*, began in 1950.

On Friday mornings, Godfrey's shows were broadcast from a studio in his home located on some 2,000 acres of lush scenery and farm land in Leesburg,



**ARTHUR GODFREY** in a jet training plane at Bolling Air Force Base, Washington, in 1950.

Virginia, where he lived with his wife Mary, daughter Pat, and son Mike. CBS had installed a private, mini-studio there, and listeners often did not realize Godfrey was in Virginia, while the rest of his crew were in New York.

Godfrey's daily coast-to-coast radio show and his two nighttime television shows consistently earned top ratings. According to surveys, he reached up to 82 million people every week.

By this time, Godfrey was a full commander in the Naval Reserve, an avid flier, and an enthusiastic advocate of air power. On Armed Forces Day in May 1950, he flew an Air Force jet at 35,000 feet and described what it was like to 30 million people. He also flew in a formation of giant Air Force B-36 bombers and praised them publicly. When the Navy sent him to a jet course at Pensacola, Florida, to qualify for carrier landings,

he was equally generous with his praise.

Godfrey became acquainted with many important people as the result of his interest in aviation. Among them were General Curtis Le May, Chief of the Strategic Air Command, and Eddie Rickenbacker, World War One flying ace and Chairman of Eastern Airlines.

Godfrey's friendship with Rickenbacker led to his appearance in a documentary film produced by Eastern. In the movie, Godfrey piloted a four-motor Constellation and explained safety and navigation procedures.

Godfrey owned two planes himself, a four-place Navion and a twin-engine Douglas DC-3, which was fitted to carry 14 passengers. In addition, he flew everything in the Navy and Air Force hangers and was described by Charles E. Wilson, Secretary of Defense, as the best non-commercial pilot in the country.

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During his jet training in Pensacola, Godfrey heard of a sailor named Julius La Rosa with a reputation as a talented singer. Godfrey listened to him and liked what he heard.

Godfrey invited La Rosa to appear on his Wednesday night show, *Arthur Godfrey and His Friends*. When La Rosa accepted, Godfrey arranged special leave for him.

La Rosa was an immediate hit. When he left the Navy, Godfrey hired him. La Rosa's popularity grew quickly with audiences, and he was soon one of their favorite performers.

By 1953, Godfrey was at the peak of his popularity. He received some 60,000 letters per month, more than any other radio or TV personality. Godfrey also received thousands of gifts including food, clothing, appliances, jewelry, medicine, home furnishings, games, toys, and live animals. The animals were given to zoos, and many of the other gifts were donated to orphanages, hospitals, and other charities.



**ANNOUNCER TONY MARVIN**



**ARTHUR GODFREY** recuperating from a hip operation in his bed at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston in 1953.

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Early in 1953, Godfrey announced he would have corrective surgery on one of the hips damaged in his car accident some 20 years earlier. He received nearly 3,000 letters offering hopes and prayers for a quick recovery.

When Godfrey entered the hospital, many newspapers carried his picture and best wishes on their front pages. During the surgery, there were almost hourly bulletins about his condition and progress.

Godfrey was away from his shows for three months recuperating, and, while he was gone, substitute hosts filled in for him. During that same period, La Rosa and Archie Bleyer, Godfrey's orchestra leader, teamed up and made a hit recording. In addition, La Rosa, whose popularity had been soaring, began receiving more fan mail than his boss.

One of the substitute hosts for Godfrey was Ed Sullivan, newspaper columnist and host of the Sunday evening TV show, *The Toast of the Town*. Sullivan liked the talents of Godfrey's performers

and subsequently arranged for several of them, including La Rosa, to appear on his show. Contrary to Godfrey's wishes, Sullivan paid them far more than they were accustomed to receiving.

Godfrey learned that some of his employees were making more money by entertaining elsewhere. And he heard that La Rosa in particular had been receiving two to three times per personal appearance in night clubs what he was paying him per week.

When Godfrey was back before the cameras, he thanked his audience for their prayers. His operation had given him new mobility, but it was not a complete success. Then he received a letter telling him to deal with La Rosa only through his lawyer.

Godfrey was glad to be back, but he was angered by what some of his employees had been doing during his absence. He had always considered them to be friends and had tried to look out for them. He had attempted to keep them from show-business folks in order to keep them humble, for he did not want phonies around.

Godfrey seemed in good spirits during his program on October 19, 1953. Near the end of the show, when La Rosa came to the mike, Godfrey appeared pleased with the enthusiastic applause given the singer.

Then Godfrey recapped La Rosa's career and mentioned that he had been impressed by the singer's humble streak, which was typical of all the "Little Godfreys." He went on to say that he had encouraged La Rosa to keep that attitude and said that, as long as he did, he would have nothing to worry about.

Next, Godfrey pointed out that during La Rosa's two years on the show, he had built up a large following and that he and Bleyer had started their own recording company. Then he stated slowly and deliberately that La Rosa had gotten to



**JULIUS LA ROSA**

be a great big name. At that point, Godfrey turned the mike over to La Rosa and asked him to sing.

At the end of the number, Godfrey thanked La Rosa and without warning announced that the singer was leaving to star in his own programs. With that, Godfrey wished La Rosa well and closed the show.

Godfrey's dismissal of La Rosa stunned many in the audience, and, for a time, resulted in negative press. However, Godfrey's popularity remained solid, and he continued to be the top star in the CBS line-up.

La Rosa moved on from the experience and quickly found new opportunities. Ed Sullivan hired him for a series of appearances on *The Toast of the Town* and again paid him several times what he had been receiving.

During the next 2 1/2 years, La Rosa earned more than a million dollars for appearances in hotels and night clubs. In his last year with Godfrey, he received \$35,000. La Rosa concluded that being



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fired was the best thing that could have happened to him.

Early in January 1954, Godfrey took off from the airport in Teterboro, New Jersey, in his DC-3. In the process, he flew directly over the top of the control tower. He was charged by the CAA with buzzing the tower.

On January 16, Ed Sullivan ran a column in the New York *Daily News* criticizing Godfrey as a matter of public interest. Sullivan charged him with reckless operation of a DC-3 and with flippancy in answering subsequent charges.

On March 16, the CAA suspended Godfrey's license to fly. However, only a few months later on September 17, the license was reinstated. It was suggested that Godfrey had used his influence to regain his license.



MR. AND MRS. ARTHUR GODFREY

What had happened to Arthur Godfrey? Some thought he had just been reacting to threats, real or imagined, to his authority and reputation. Others felt he was exhausted from overwork and in pain from his old injuries and recent operation. Whatever the case, most Godfrey fans remained loyal.

In the late 1950's, Godfrey experienced personal and professional setbacks. He was diagnosed with lung cancer and, because of poor health, gave up his TV shows in 1959. However, he stayed with his CBS radio program, which remained a morning favorite.

Godfrey's cancerous lung was removed, and, after he was pronounced fully cured, he began looking for a new TV program. However, CBS had no spot for him. The public had grown accustomed to polished entertainment, and there was little demand for his informality.

Godfrey continued his network radio program until April 30, 1972, when he took it off the air himself. It was 27 years to the day after his CBS network show began, and Godfrey left with an emotional farewell.

Complete retirement, however, was not on Godfrey's mind. He took up the cause of ecology and occasionally appeared in commercials. One of the items he advertised was a washday product called Axion.

Godfrey was still aware of his reputation for honesty, so, when he learned that Axion polluted as much as it cleaned, he publicly criticized it. It was almost like old times.

Arthur died ten years ago on March 16, 1983. Yet the memory of his life lingers on . . . an engaging story of a penniless youth, a struggling wanderer, a successful showman . . . and many years of pleasant entertainment. Thanks, Arthur, for the memories. ■