

HERE'S MORGAN!

BY CLAIR SCHULZ

The one movie he starred in was a flop. He bounced from one radio station to another as if he had a ricochet romance with that medium. His contribution to the history of television is negligible; he merely sat on a panel and tried to pry secrets out of guests. So why is it that Henry Morgan has a small but loyal coterie of admirers?

Henry Morgan spoke the words that most of us would like to say but lack the gumption or temerity to enunciate. To Morgan it didn't matter if the other party was a sponsor, executive, influential columnist, superior officer, or audience; he said what he felt regardless of the consequences.

Morgan's straightforward approach to life even extended to his own shortcomings. About his first job, for instance, given to him in 1931 at WCAU in Philadelphia when he was sixteen he later said, "I was one lousy page boy." Dismissed after three weeks, he was hired as an announcer at the station because, according to Henry, he had a loud mouth and would work cheaper than anyone else. Because announcers needed to have zippy names and Henry Lerner von Ost, Jr., tied up the tongue rather than slide off of it, the fledgling adopted the surname of Niles Morgan, a ballroom bouncer.

Either due to his incompetence or the vagaries of the Depression Henry didn't last very long at stations in Brooklyn, Phila-

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delphia, Duluth, and Boston before heading back to New York. At WOR, more to amuse himself than his audience, he began tossing in jokes on remote broadcasts and between recorded songs in the studio. The station manager gave Morgan his own fifteen minutes on Saturdays, hoping that would get the playfulness out of his system, but when the show caught on with listeners it became a part of the daily schedule at 6:45 leading into the evening programming.

Morgan freely admitted that the program was "kind of weird." After the theme of "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow" faded, he would follow with the saucy "Hello, anybody, here's Morgan." Then he would improvise monologues about items in the news that struck his fancy and play "oddball records" from the Spike Jones school of discord.

But when Morgan broke a taboo by ridiculing the sponsor's products he brought about a broadcasting rarity: people were actually tuning in to his programs to hear the commercials (or, more precisely, what he *did* to the commercials).

He referred to the president of Adler Elevator Shoes as "Old Man Adler" and vowed that he "wouldn't wear those shoes to a dog fight." When taken to task for his brash statement he later told listeners. "I apologize. I would wear them to a dog fight. But no place else."

He accused the makers of Life Savers of gypping customers because they had drilled out the centers of their candy and promised that he would keep quiet about their "mulcting the public" if they would give him the centers which he would sell as Morgan's Mint Middles.

Manufacturers of Oh! Henry candy bars screamed "Oh, brother!" when Morgan followed "Oh! Henry is a meal in itself" with "But you eat three meals of Oh! Henry and your teeth will fall out" and suggested



HENRY MORGAN in front of the cigar store

that if people consumed enough of them they would “get sick and die.”

Advertisers sighed with relief when Morgan enlisted in the Army Air Corps in 1943.

After the war ended, he resumed his daily program which reached a national audience on ABC. But quarter-hour shows were a dying breed and one-man bands have a tendency to play the same tunes over and over so network bigwigs convinced Henry to try his hand at the typical thirty-minute format with orchestra, singers, and a regular cast in the fall of 1946. They should have known better.

When the announcer asked rather than shouted “The Henry Morgan Show?” at the start of the program, listeners knew the ride would be a bit bumpy and they prepared themselves for frequent lurches away from conformity.

Perhaps more than any other program the *Henry Morgan Show* resembled a revue: a series of skits, mock interviews, and parodies often joined together by absolutely nothing. It was that freewheeling air of

“What’s going to happen next?” that made the show a fresh departure from traditional radio fare. Henry and Arnold Stang bantering in Brooklynese might be followed by a version of *Hamlet* done a la Sam Spade or a bit of psychobabble spoken by daffy Heinrich von Morgan or a British quiz show called “Take It or If You’d Rather Not You Needn’t” or the Question Man whose answers were farther out in left field than Andy Pafko.

Interspersed among these droll bits was the exact opposite of the sweetest music this side of heaven. On one show Stan Freberg, several years before his rise to fame, played “The Flight of the Bumblebee” on his lips. A polyglot sang “Old MacDonald Had a Farm” in five languages, a woman and her cocker spaniel mangled “Sugar Blues,” a tuba player took time out from his huffing and puffing to render “Jingle Bells” in Greek, and other performers aired out bagpipes, kazoos, and panpipes. Such interludes may have caused people at home to hope that the commercials would be coming along shortly to signal a return to normalcy. They should have known better.

Even when the show could not attract a sponsor Morgan would invent commercials of his own like “Try One-a-Minute Vitamins. Pop one in your mouth. Do this every minute, every day. You’ll agree you were never more active in your life.” When Eversharp Shick razors came on board during the first season Henry treated his new sponsor like a voodoo doll: he needled the “push-pull, click-click” slogan by using inappropriately loud sound effects, cited instances of men who bloodied their fingers handling the razor blades, and, in the unkindest cut of all, cast doubts about the Shave-a-thon (“the world’s worst commercial”) by insinuating that the winner using the Shick razor was an eight-year-old boy.

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After Shick bailed out late in 1947, Rayve Cream Shampoo became Henry's next victim. Not content to poke fun on his own turn, he visited the *Fred Allen Show* in May of 1948 to "Rayve" about the product with the man he admired more than anybody else in show business. Morgan told Fred that, according to the small print in his contract, he not only had to make the shampoo and hawk it but he also must throw dirt in men's hair to increase sales and assured Allen that if he didn't like his first shampoo "we give you twenty-four tubes of the same stuff to teach you a lesson."

Another link connecting the two men is that they each made a motion picture which somehow missed the mark and left both comedians and their ardent fans feeling that more should have been made of the material and the talent on both sides of the camera. Although Allen never regarded *It's in the Bag* the same way old foe Jack Benny jested about his fabled turkey, *The Horn Blows at Midnight*, he thought the penny-pinching methods of the producer hampered the hide-and-seek plot and left some of the best work of radio veterans like Benny, Rudy Vallee, William Bendix, and Victor Moore on the cutting-room floor.

Morgan's opus, *So This is New York*, could have been the sleeper of 1948. Carl Foreman adapted the screenplay from a Ring Lardner novel, Richard Fleischer directed, Stanley Kramer produced, and the cast consisted of experienced mirth-makers such as Vallee, Stang, Hugh Herbert, and Leo Gorcey. Unfortunately, this curiosity, set in the 1920s about country folk going to the big city in search of a husband for an unmarried sister, aimed for too many targets during its 78 minutes and the shortcuts taken to save money were glaringly obvious. Henry never had much to say about *So This is New York*, but if he

had been asked about this rarely-seen movie he might have commented sardonically, "It isn't a lost film. It's just hiding."

Morgan liked to close his shows with the promise that he would "be on this same corner in front of the cigar store next week." In the spring of 1948 he stepped in front of the cameras of WPIL in Philadelphia for a program called *On the Corner* which is believed to be the first televised network series for the American Broadcasting Company. As the man on the street Henry would flip through the pages of *Variety*, come across the name of a puppeteer, dancer, singer, or impressionist who would then perform, and toss in an array of gibes between acts. As usual, he saved some mordant remarks for the commercials of Admiral Corporation, who tolerated his scoffing attitude toward their appliances for just five weeks before pulling the plug.

In 1949 Morgan appeared on the final episode of the *Fred Allen Show* and the following year he followed Allen off what Fred called the treadmill to oblivion. But producers didn't forget the efforts of radio cast members Stang, Pert Kelton, and Art Carney who soon found work in television. And other influential figures remembered the curmudgeon with the caustic wit and an affinity for baiting sponsors and presumed that he must be a jolly bad fellow with a radical tinge.

After Henry's name appeared in *Red Channels*, a book citing entertainers supposedly sympathetic to communism, he found himself blacklisted. This came as quite a surprise to Morgan who, as an equal-opportunity basher, had taken frequent pot shots at Russia and had openly confessed that, as a free-spirited iconoclast who called no man master, he could not have endured communism's restrictions for even one minute.

Despite his protests of innocence he found himself out in the Cold War looking



for work. Finally WMGM let him broadcast from Hutton's, a Manhattan restaurant, from midnight to three a.m. The temptation to pull pranks in the middle of the night just to see if anybody was listening, like he did in 1933 at WCAU in Philadelphia when he inserted names of studio executives into missing persons reports, may have been hard for Henry to resist, but with personalities such as Jackie Gleason and James Stewart regularly stopping by, Morgan had no shortage of lively subjects to interview and little dead air to fill.

Producer Mark Goodson, a regular diner at Hutton's who had been hatching an idea for a game show, decided that Morgan might be the right person to function as resident wit on the new program just as Fred Allen had been doing on *What's My Line?* For the next fifteen years on *I've Got a Secret*, Henry sat between the likes of Jayne Meadows, Faye Emerson, Bess Myerson, and Betsy Palmer and asked questions with a sly smile that seemed to say, "I've got a secret of my own. For the first time in my life I've got a steady job!"

After *Secret* ended its season each spring,

Henry either satisfied his wanderlust in Asia or Europe or played in summer stock. It may seem hard to picture the natural improvisator in roles requiring him to stick to the scripts, but he acquitted himself well as pompous Sheridan Whiteside in *The Man Who Came to Dinner*, clever Sakini in *Teahouse of the August Moon*, and fussy Felix Unger in *The Odd Couple*.

Even less likely is the prospect of the man who derided the products of countless advertisers doing voice-overs for TV commercials, but that is what happened after *I've Got a Secret* left the air. Morgan continued working with ad agencies taping thirty-second spots until just a few months before his death on May 19, 1994.

But at heart he remained a nonconformist who fought convention all along the line. His wife Karen, whom he had married in 1978 at Sealand with only dolphins and a magistrate in attendance, carried out his deathbed request that, instead of a funeral, his friends should remember him at a memorial party at Sardi's, his favorite restaurant.

Even his own obituary, written in early 1994 as a preface to his autobiography, steered away from the usual path and, instead of describing his accomplishments, listed all of his liabilities from childhood illnesses to adult maladies like gout, lumbago, and heart ailments. Also contributing to his demise were "500 pastrami sandwiches, 3,000 quarts of beer, 7,000 quarts of liquor, 17,250 bacon and egg breakfasts, 21,000 steaks and hamburgers, and 1,296,000 cigarettes." Ever the comedian, he saves the zinger for last: "2 wives."

There is no evidence that Henry Morgan wrote his own epitaph, but if he had very likely the wording on his headstone would have been "Here's Morgan—This Space for Rent." ■

(NOTE—Tune in to TWTD August 22 for a four-hour salute to Henry Morgan.)