

We Want Cantor!

BY ELIZABETH MC LEOD

At the close of the 1920s, Eddie Cantor was one of Broadway's top attractions, the star of a continuing series of top-rank musical comedies. Beginning in 1910 with vaudeville amateur night shows, the former Israel Iskowitz had climbed to the top of his profession — the *Ziegfeld Follies*, *Broadway Brevities*, *The Midnight Rounders*, *Make It Snappy*, *Kid Boots*, and *Whoopee* had succeeded each other as Cantor star vehicles, and the performer had amassed a fortune.

When September 1929 began, Eddie Cantor was a millionaire five times over. By the end of October, he was \$285,000 in debt.

And by the end of 1933, he was a millionaire again.

Radio made it happen.

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Many stage performers turned to broadcasting during the Depression years, as a hedge against the uncertainties of Broadway, but none

made a more spectacular success than Eddie Cantor. He had dabbled in the medium during the late twenties, but it wasn't until 1931 that Cantor made a serious plunge into the aural medium. In February of that year, he made two important guest appearances: an appearance on the CBS *Radio Follies* series in which he performed in a broadcast adaptation of *Whoopee*, and a spot the fol-

lowing night on Rudy Vallee's *Fleischmann's Yeast Hour*. This double dose of Cantor made an impression on the audience — and on Vallee's sponsor.

Standard Brands was looking for a new attraction for its Sunday night NBC feature for Chase and Sanborn Coffee. The series had been a success earlier in the year under the Paris boulevardier Maurice Chevalier, but the French star saw broadcasting only as a fill-in chore between movie jobs, and wasn't interested in mak-

ing the arrangement permanent. Chase and Sanborn wanted a performer with panache — with charisma — with magnetism. A performer who could really seize the attention of the listening audience.

And after hearing Eddie's performance with Vallee, Standard Brands wanted Cantor.

A deal was signed that summer — and on September 13, 1931, the new *Chase and Sanborn Hour* made its debut with a bang. Eddie Cantor bounced out onto the stage at NBC's Times Square Studio in the New Amsterdam Theatre and announced that he was running for President.

The "Cantor for President" theme — and its memorable "We Want Can-tor, We Want Can-tor" chant — ran thruout the 1931-32 season, and in that grim Depression winter, something about Eddie Cantor's unapologetically anti-authoritarian message struck a note in the listening audience. Within weeks, Cantor was the focus of a nationwide craze. And no one loved him more than his studio audience.

That live audience was a critical component in the success of the show. Cantor's first several Chase and Sanborn shows were broadcast with the audience isolated behind a huge glass curtain, and in a surviving 1931 broadcast, Cantor's timing seems off. His delivery depended on audience response for best effect - and without those laughs, he seems to be talking to himself.

Cantor himself understood this problem, and finally convinced NBC to allow the glass curtain to be raised. Surviving 1933 recordings show the result — revealing Cantor as a performer who fully involved his audience in his performances. He usually appeared at the microphone in outlandish costume — in one broadcast, announcer Jimmy Wallington describes the comedian as being garbed in a full-length fur coat, a bra and girdle, silk stockings, and high heels, and the hysterical reaction of the stu-



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dio audience makes it clear that Cantor is sashaying about the stage in precisely that outfit. Cantor frequently appeared in drag during these broadcasts, and his sketches with Wallington often verged into what was then known as "nance" comedy, giving the show a well-earned reputation for outrageous innuendoes.

But it wasn't all nudge-nudge. Cantor used every trick in the comedy textbook to keep his audience laughing — broad slapstick, heavy insult comedy directed at orchestra leader David Rubinoff, and — most interestingly — frequent acknowledgement of his Jewish heritage.

Cantor's references to matzoh balls and potato pancakes and even occasional Yiddishisms are a refreshing break from the completely de-ethnicized personae favored by most radio comics, and gave Cantor's show a Lower East Side flavor absent from most other programs of the day. Conventional industry wisdom would have suggested that such an approach would have alienated rural audiences — especially in an era in which heartland anti-Semitism was on the rise — but Cantor's ratings told a different story. Eventually, Conventional Wisdom did win out — and the Cantor of the later 1930s and 1940s

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became a distinctly less ethnic personality.

Cantor was obviously out to entertain the studio audience. After a lifetime on the stage, he could hardly avoid it. But did listeners at home get the full effect of his broadcasts? This is a point which was debated quite vigorously during the era of these programs, and several critics took Cantor to task for his stagy antics. The actual ratings of the program, however, seem to emphasize that listeners didn't much care what the critics thought — no other program in the history of radio ever exceeded the 58.6 Crossley rating logged by Cantor in early 1933. Clearly, Cantor was speaking to Depression America in language it could understand — falling right in line with the manic style then popular in movies. The times were desperate — and so also was the comedy. That in a sentence is the best way to explain the extraordinary popularity such performers enjoyed.

In the fall of 1934, after a wildly successful run, Cantor and Chase and Sanborn parted company. His next series, beginning in 1935 for Pebecco Toothpaste, would be streamlined to a half hour - and would set the pattern for the rest of his radio career.



Deanna Durbin and Eddie Cantor



Eddie Cantor and Dinah Shore

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The stage antics would be toned down, and increasingly, the emphasis would be on Eddie Cantor as a father figure to a parade of new young talent. By 1936, when Cantor moved on to the Texaco program, this image was crystallized — and Cantor shared the spotlight with such youthful stars as boy soprano Bobby Breen, the exquisitely-voiced Deanna Durbin, and later the torchy young jazz singer Dinah Shore. There was no shortage of comedy — although increasingly, Cantor turned the laughs over to stooges, such dialect personalities as Harry “Parkyakarkus” Einstien and Bert “The Mad Russian” Gordon.

From Texaco, Cantor moved on to Camel cigarettes - and it was during this series that his radio career hit its first major crisis — a crisis precipitated by Cantor's unflinching sense of right and justice.

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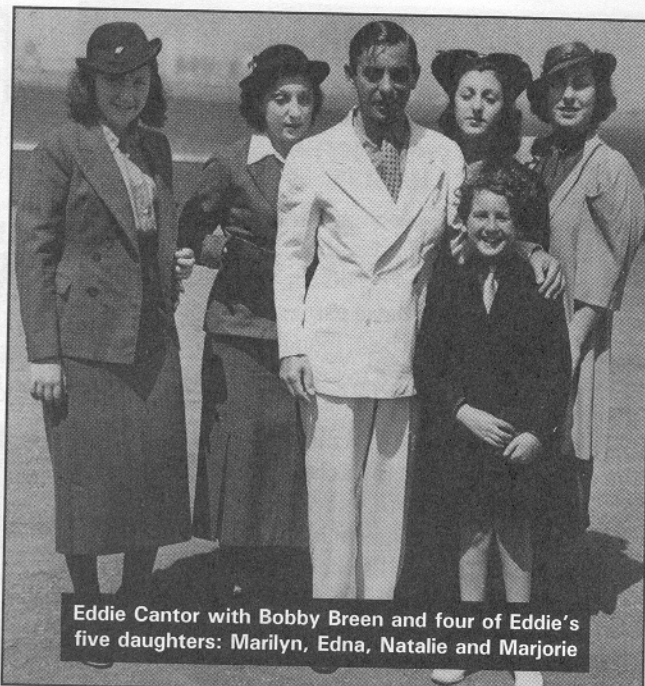
Coughlin’s remarks personally. On June 13, 1939, in a speech at the New York World’s Fair, Cantor took on Father Coughlin — denouncing him in a fiery address as “not only an enemy of Jews — but of all Americans!”

Coughlin’s followers were extremely active, especially in New York, where there had been numerous street skirmishes in which bands of Coughlinites were charged with trying to incite violence against Jews. Against this backdrop, Cantor’s comments were bound to ignite a

furor. Enraged Coughlinites flooded R. J. Reynolds Company with telegrams, and Cantor was ordered to publicly retract his comments. His response shines out as one of the gutsiest public stands ever taken by any radio performer. He absolutely refused to retract his criticism of Coughlin, or to back down in any way from his opposition to Nazism, Fascism or anti-Semitism. “Before I’m a performer,” he declared, “I’m an American — before I’m an American, I’m a Jew — and before I’m a Jew, I’m a man.”

Cantor was fired, and didn’t work in radio for nearly a year. When Bristol-Myers picked him up in the fall of 1940, the agency, Young and Rubicam, circulated a memo specifically warning against any activity that would portray Cantor as “ever being guilty of having a serious thought or being capable of a serious deed.”

But Eddie Cantor’s social conscience continued to shape his broadcasts, thru his commitment to charity work. In 1938, Can-



Eddie Cantor with Bobby Breen and four of Eddie’s five daughters: Marilyn, Edna, Natalie and Marjorie

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tor had teamed with President Roosevelt to inaugurate the March of Dimes — a nationwide campaign against infantile paralysis, which Cantor tirelessly promoted on the air and in personal appearances. Thru the 1940s, as his radio series coasted along, Cantor became closely associated with charitable causes and good works of all kinds — taking on a sort of elder-statesman role in show business.

It was a role he would fill for the rest of his life — thru the end of his radio career and thru his years on television. When he died in 1964, Americans mourned not just a great entertainer, but a great humanitarian.

A humanitarian, yes — but one who could also be side-splittingly funny leaping around a theatre stage in women’s underwear.

NOTE— Tune in TWTD November 18 for a four-hour salute to Eddie Cantor, who will be posthumously inducted into the Radio Hall of Fame that same date.