

Cover Story:

RED SKELTON

To many he was a master in the arts of pantomime and slapstick comedy. Others thought he was simply a burlesque comic who would try for the easiest possible laugh. However, no one can argue with the great success Red Skelton has achieved during his show business career.

This success did not come easy to Red. The youngest of four sons, Red was born in Vincennes, Indiana, July 18, 1913. His father died two months before Red was born, leaving his mother to raise the family.

Times were tough and as Red grew older he began taking small jobs around town to bring a little extra money into the house. By the time he was 12, Red

had come to realize that the greatest pleasure he got out of life was making people laugh.

Whether it was the show business blood in him (Red's father had been a circus clown) or just a strong desire to make people feel happy is anyone's guess. But at age 12, Red ran away from home and joined up with a traveling medicine show that had just passed through town.

For the next two years Red would return home for school, then rejoin the medicine show during the summer. Red's heart just wasn't into getting an education and at 14 he left home for good to pursue his career.

During the three years that followed, Red took any job he could find that allowed him to perform in front of an audience. From touring with various acting companies to performing solo on a riverboat, Skelton let no job opportunity slip through his fingers. Red even worked a stint as a clown with the Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus, the same circus his father had worked for years before.



THE SKELTON SHOW CAST (from left) David Rose, Anita Ellis, Wonderful Smith, Verna Felton, Red Skelton, GeGe Pearson, Pat McGeehan.

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RED SKELTON

By 1930 Red had begun playing small burlesque houses and was supplementing that job by working as a clown at dance marathons around the country. It was during this time of his life that Red met his first wife.

Edna Stillwell was a strong and intelligent woman who had a great deal of confidence in Red's abilities and wanted him to succeed. Edna stood by Red during the tough years that were ahead and he came to rely on her for more than just emotional support. Since Red was never adept at handling business affairs, Edna took over control of their finances. She was so proficient at this job that even after their divorce Red would turn to her for business advice.

After struggling on the dance marathon circuit for several more years, Skelton finally caught a break. Watching Red during one of these shows was a man by the name of Jim Harkins. Harkins was a veteran of vaudeville and he felt Red had all the talent to become a star. Through Harkins, the Skeltons' got in

touch with Tom Kennedy, a New York agent. Kennedy had also seen Red perform on several occasions and was impressed enough to sign him as a client.

After making a few forgettable film shorts, Skelton finally got his chance to perform on a major nightclub stage, The Lido in Montreal, Canada. Red was a huge success in Canada playing to full houses for over a year.

By now his reputation had reached the United States and Red returned home to the same type of packed crowds that had loved him up North. His increasing popularity caught the eye of both movie and radio executives who saw Red as an up and coming star.

Although Red was a visual comic and not really suited for radio, he loved the new challenge and worked on improving his voice characterizations. Successful local shows in Cincinnati and Chicago got Red the opportunity to perform over the NBC network on "The Fleischmann Hour" starring Rudy Vallee in August of 1938. Red was such a hit that he was invited back for two more appearances. This exposure was great for Red's ratings in Chicago where he continued his local show until the summer of 1939.

At this point the Skeltons' decided to try their luck in Hollywood. Red signed with MGM and did have a successful movie career, eventually earning the title "MGM's clown". In fact it was the surprise success of Red's film "Whistling In The Dark" that gave him his opportunity to have a network radio show.

Critics praised Skelton's performance in this film putting him on a par with Bob Hope. With comparisons like that, it was inevitable that sponsors would start to offer Red the chance to host his own network show.

Raleigh Cigarettes was the first sponsor to put in a bid for Red's services. Desperately wanting to grab a foothold in the tobacco market, Raleigh Cigarettes figured that sponsoring a rising young comic would be a perfect way to sell

their product. Raleigh bought the Skelton show for \$15,000 a week for 39 weeks and officially gave it the title "The Red Skelton Scrapbook of Satire".

That \$15,000 a week covered Red's salary of \$2,500 per week, the salaries of bandleader Ozzie Nelson and his wife, singer Harriet Hilliard plus all of the writers including Red's wife Edna who was considered the head writer. Edna couldn't write a line but she did know the kind of comedy Red was comfortable in doing and she made sure the writers never made Red do any comedy that he didn't feel right doing.

"The Skelton Scrapbook of Satire" first went on the air over NBC in October of 1941. Ironically the show was scheduled in the time slot immediately following Bob Hope's show. The first program set the format that Red's show would follow throughout its run. Red would start with an opening monologue usually made up of jokes dealing with current news items. Ozzie and Harriet would follow with a band number and a song, then chat with Red for a few minutes.

The second part of the program would consist of several sketches that allowed Skelton to use his many voice characterizations. San Fernando Red, Clem Kaddidhopper, Sheriff Deadeye and Junior "The Mean Widdle Kid" all would get their chance to shine on the Skelton program along with any other characters he and his writers could develop.

The show was an immediate hit, placing in the top ten of the Hooper ratings after only a month on the air. The fact that Red's program followed Bob Hope's (which was the number one show at the time) certainly didn't hurt. But whatever the reason for the programs success, Red was now a bonafide star. Skelton's show stayed atop the ratings through 1944. The only thing that was

able to stop the show's success was World War II.

Upon hearing the news of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Red decided to volunteer for military service. Word of Red's intentions got back to the head of MGM studios, Louis B. Mayer who quickly summoned Red into his office. Mayer explained to Red that although he understood and respected his desire to serve, Red would be of greater service to his country by entertaining the troops and civilians here at home. In this way Skelton would be helping to boost morale all over America. Red took Mayer's advice and continued his radio and movie career while performing at various service camps around the country in his spare time.

It was at this time that Red and Edna reached a parting of the ways and were divorced. Now, without a wife, Red lost his draft exempt status and within months was inducted into the service. So when Red returned, his writers were waiting for him. Two people that wouldn't be back for Skelton's new show were Ozzie and Harriet who had become stars on their own show.

To replace them Red hired David Forrester to lead the orchestra and gifted radio performers Verna Felton, Lurene Tuttle, and Pat McGeehan to help him with the comedy. Red's new show premiered in December of 1945 and picked up right where the old show left off. Skelton's new program zoomed to the top of the ratings again and remained there throughout the 1940's.

In 1949 Skelton switched networks and joined CBS. Red certainly wasn't unhappy with his treatment by NBC, it was just that the offer from CBS was too good to pass up. William Paley, the president of CBS was determined to make his the number one network and was going to spare no expense in achieving that goal. By offering huge, attractive contracts, Paley was able to persuade Jack Benny, Amos 'n' Andy, Edgar



RED SKELTON HAMS IT UP WITH HIS SOUND EFFECTS MEN

Bergan and Red Skelton to join CBS. Red remained a regular on the CBS schedule until 1953 when he returned to NBC for his final season on radio.

By 1950 both NBC and CBS were pressuring Skelton to bring his show to television. Red's skills as a visual comedian were obviously tailor-made for this new medium. However as was his custom, Red was afraid of failure. He finally agreed to do a television series in 1951 over NBC with the stipulation that he could continue his series on radio. In this way Red figured that if he was a flop on TV he would still have his radio show to fall back on.

Doing a series simultaneously on radio and television would seem to have been an enormous task for his writers but they were able to solve this problem in a rather unique manner.

From the start of his career, Red had kept a file of every routine he had ever performed plus any sketch that his writers had ever written including those that never got on the air for one reason or another. That file really came in handy

now. While Red and his writers concentrated on the television series, Red's ex-wife Edna would go through the files, pick out the best of the material that Red hadn't used and put it into script form. From there the writers would only have to write lead-ins for each sketch and the job of writing a "new" script was finished.

In the long run, Red's fear of television was unnecessary. After a rough two years, Red moved his show to CBS where his program became just as popular as his show had been on radio. His television series was on the air for 20 years and usually wound up at or near the top of the ratings.

Today—at 71, Red Skelton is still quite active. An accomplished painter, he has had many exhibits of his work. Red also does an occasional special for cable television and continues to perform at colleges and theaters around the country, leaving them laughing wherever he performs.

— TERRY BAKER

Nostalgia Digest -5-