

There's Always Hope

By TERRY BAKER

If one were to sit down and think about all the great comedians of the past fifty years many famous names would come to mind. Surely listing all of them would be almost impossible but any such list would have to include such greats as Allen, Benny, Burns and Skelton. Then of course, there's always Hope.

Over the years, Bob Hope has firmly entrenched himself as one of America's most popular and loved comedy performers. But, considering his humble beginnings, few could have predicted what the fates would have in store for him.

Bob was born Leslie Townes Hope in Eltham, England on May 29, 1903. He was the fifth of seven boys that were to be born to William and Avis Hope. Bob's father was a successful stonemason whose income provided the Hope family with a comfortable existence.

Unfortunately, the turn of the century had brought with it bad times for all stonemasons. Architectural styles were changing and the talents of men like William Hope were no longer in demand. Business began to decline and, as times got tougher, William decided that the Hope family needed a change. That meant coming to the United States.

William came to the states in 1906 joining two of his brothers who had brought their families to America and settled in Cleveland several years before. After two years of hard work, William finally saved enough money to bring his family over from England and they also set up household in Cleveland.

Bob was now five and still showed no outward signs of the entertainer he was to become. That would not come for a few more years and then more out

of necessity than a desire on Bob's part.

The move to America had not solved the Hope's financial problems and the boys were encouraged to help out in any way they could. The older sons took small jobs while Bob and some of his other brothers would go out to a local park on Sundays and sing for money. Fortunately for Bob he had been blessed with a good voice and as the years passed he would win several talent contests conducted by local vaudeville houses. This brought much needed money into the Hope household.

Obviously, Bob had talent and, as he grew older, his desire to perform increased. Not that he had any intention of making a career of this but since he was enjoying himself and earning some pocket money to boot, why stop.

Bob liked to sing but treated it as nothing more than a lucrative hobby. After all, he had other activities to occupy his time. Bob still attended school and since winning talent contests were by no means a certainty he needed to find other ways to augment his income. That meant delivering newspapers, shining shoes and taking whatever small jobs came around.

It was not until after he finished school that he began to look at show business as a serious career alternative. Using money he earned by working in his brother's meat market, he began to take dance lessons and eventually teamed up with a local Cleveland boy named Lloyd Durbin.

The two boys worked up a song and dance act that soon caught the attention of Fred Hurley, who produced "tab shows", small musical revues that traveled around the country. Hurley needed talent and thought enough of the boys to in-

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DECEMBER, 1985 - JANUARY, 1986



BOB HOPE

clude them in one of his shows.

Unfortunately, the team of Durbin & Hope was short lived. During their first season on the road Durbin contracted food poisoning and died shortly thereafter.

Bob's next (and what was to be his last) partner was a young dancer named George Byrne. Byrne had been hired by Hurley as a replacement for Durbin upon his death. It was a wise choice.

Not only was George a good dancer but he and Bob hit it off right from the start. They both harbored dreams of becoming vaudeville stars and together they began working toward that goal.

Bob and George knew it would take more than just desire to make it big on the vaudeville stage. They would need to develop a great act as well and immediately set out to do just that.

Performing in these tab shows proved to be the golden opportunity for Bob and George to work on perfecting their act before they took it to the vaudeville

stage. After two years of fine tuning and polishing their act, they felt they were ready to try it on their own. They left the tab show circuit and began taking bookings in theaters throughout the midwest.

Bob and George were good as a team and always seemed to find work, but they never reached the big time. A few years after they began their partnership they found themselves performing in a small theater in New Castle, Pennsylvania.

One evening Bob was asked by the theater manager to go on stage and plug an act that would be appearing there the following week. Bob agreed but instead of making a simple announcement about the upcoming show he threw in some jokes as well. These jokes got big laughs and the manager asked Hope to continue the routine the rest of the week. This marked the beginning of the end of the Hope/Byrne partnership.

George heard the laughs Bob was getting and didn't want to stand in his partner's way. So when Bob came to George to discuss his plans to try his luck as a single act, George gave him nothing but encouragement and wished him the best. They parted good friends and remained that way long after Bob became a success.

By 1928, after a few months as a single act, Bob began to realize that it took more than just telling jokes to be a successful comedian. He had yet to develop a sense of timing.

He would go on stage and rattle off one joke after another without noticing how the audience was responding to them. He never realized that something was wrong with his delivery until one performance in Fort Worth when his act completely flopped.

Hope couldn't understand why the material that had worked so well was failing him now. After the show he was approached by Bob O'Donnell, head of the Interstate Vaudeville Circuit.

O'Donnell told Hope to relax and slow down his routine. Texans liked a slow, relaxed delivery and if Bob performed his act that way the audience would respond.

Hope took this advice and slowed down his next performance. The same jokes that bombed the night before were now getting big laughs. Bob was a hit.

It didn't take long for word of Bob's success to get around. Now, Hope was good enough to perform in New York and by the end of 1929 he had gotten the opportunity to prove it.

By 1932 Bob had played most of the big theaters in New York, including the Palace. It was also in 1932 that he first made the acquaintance of a young crooner named Bing Crosby.

Bob and Bing were both booked to play the Capitol Theater. Bob was to be the emcee and Bing would provide the songs. The two immediately took a liking to each other and thus was the start of a most profitable relationship.

As the years passed and their friendship grew the boys would frequently appear as guests on each others radio and television shows . . . not to mention the seven "Road" pictures they would make together.

Another event in 1932 was Bob's first appearance on radio. He was still performing at the Capitol Theater when he was approached by Major Bowes. The Major wanted to know if Bob would like to appear on his Sunday morning radio program "The Capitol Family Hour."

The owners of the Capitol thought it was a great idea. Since Bob was working at the Capitol and the radio show was done from there, it seemed natural to pair the two. The hope was that people would come and see Bob in person after they heard him on radio. This showed the changing attitude that vaudeville had about radio.

When radio first came on the scene,



vaudeville saw it as the serious threat it was and would have nothing to do with it. But by 1932 vaudeville business had dropped so severely that they were forced to use radio in an effort to promote themselves.

Hope's radio appearances did improve business but only for a short time. Vaudeville was dying and most of the top stars left the stage in order to pursue radio careers. Bob was one of the last stars to leave vaudeville. He didn't make a complete switch to radio until 1937.

Bob had made three unsuccessful attempts at radio prior to 1937. The three forgettable series were, "The Intimate Revue" in January of 1935, "The Atlantic Oil Show" in the spring of '35 and "The Rippling Rhythm Revue" in the spring of 1936.

Hope did not achieve his first radio success until he was hired to appear on "The Woodbury Soap Show" in the fall of 1937. His success on this show led to the start of his movie career. He was hired to perform in "The Big Broadcast of 1938". Hope had made several film shorts in previous years but with his appearance in "The Big Broadcast", he



was now a known commodity in Hollywood.

Since then he has starred in some seventy motion pictures. Although never receiving much critical acclaim for his work, Bob's movies have always found a large audience. American moviegoers feel comfortable with Bob because they always know what kind of picture they are going to get. Most often it will be a light romantic comedy that will make people feel good when they leave the theater. This kind of familiarity with the audience made Bob one of the top box-office draws throughout the 40's and 50's.

After Hope's appearance in "The Big Broadcast" he was signed to perform on a radio show called "Your Hollywood Parade." Bob's contribution to this show was a ten minute monologue featuring jokes dealing with current events. While the show flopped, Bob's rapid-fire delivery of his monologue proved extremely popular. So much so that in the fall of 1938 Bob finally got his own radio program.

Sponsored by Pepsodent Toothpaste, "The Bob Hope Show" premiered on the

NBC network on September 27, 1938. Within five weeks Bob's show had snared a large portion of the Tuesday night audience. The show was not much different than most other comedy-variety programs on the air at the time. It was Bob's unique style that set his show apart from the rest.

Hope opened his show with a monologue similar to that which had proved so popular on "Your Hollywood Parade." The pace was fast, (he was once clocked at seven jokes a minute) and the content always topical. Everyone became fair game for Hope's wit, from the President on down to his own sponsors.

After the monologue came the comedy skits. The plots for these skits were thin and the jokes often bordered on the silly. Hope loved to set up ridiculous situations and see how many laughs he could get with them. It is a premise he still uses on television today.

Like the other successful comedy-variety programs the show did not rely solely on the talents of its star. In addition to booking big name guests, Hope surrounded himself with a top notch supporting cast.

Francis Langford was the female vocalist with Skinnay Ennis and his orchestra providing the musical accompaniment. Bill Goodwin handled the announcing chores and Barbara Jo Allen, Blanche Stewart, Elvia Allman and Jerry Colonna helped Bob with the comedy.

Because of the fast pace of the show and the topical content of his monologue, Bob went through more material than any other comedian on the air. This required hiring more and more writers to keep his show fresh. At one point Bob had eight writers working on the show.

To insure the greatest variety of material possible, each writer would come up with his own ninety-minute script. Then the writers would listen to each other's ideas, choosing the best material to go into the final ninety-minute script.

After several days of rehearsal Bob and his cast would perform the show in front of an audience and record it. Hope and the writers then listened to the disc and edited the script down to the final thirty-minute version which aired Tuesday night.

It was a grueling ritual to perform week after week but this devotion to putting out the best possible product paid off. By the end of its second season the show was the sixth most listened to program on all of radio.

Bob really established himself as America's most popular entertainer during the war years. Even before Pearl Harbor, he had given hundreds of performances for servicemen throughout the country. Upon America's entry into the war, Bob literally took his show on the road.

Each week Hope and his cast would appear at a different military installation and perform the show before an audience of enthusiastic servicemen. In addition to the weekly radio show Hope and crew would also perform three or four shows daily at other military bases and record several shows for airing over Armed Forces Radio.

As the war progressed and more troops were going abroad, Bob led USO tours overseas and entertained GIs right on the

front lines during the months that his radio show was on hiatus. This was a practice that he would continue in later years through both the Korean and Vietnam Wars.

Couple all this traveling with the fact that he was still appearing in an average of two movies a year and you get a rough idea of how busy Bob was during the war.

Other radio and film stars did their bit for the war effort by bringing their shows to the military camps or performing with the USO, but no one did it more often or with greater devotion than Bob Hope.

His show was a perfect morale booster for the country. Nothing made Americans laugh more during these troubled times than jokes about our enemies and with Bob's penchant for topical humor they received them in abundance.

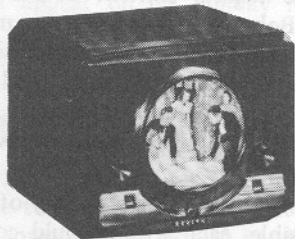
GIs especially liked the way Bob was able to joke about the rigors of army life, from bad army food to trouble dealing with officers. Then, of course, there were always the lovely Hollywood starlets that accompanied Bob to the camps just to remind the boys what they were fighting for.

Bob's overall contribution to the troops' morale was immeasurable. Suffice it to say that the soldiers always felt better after Bob's show than before. Radio listeners felt that way too, because twice during the war they made his show the number one program and never was it below fourth.

Hope's show continued going to military bases long after the war ended. From the beginning of the war through June of 1948 it has been estimated that Bob did only one show from the NBC studios.

The show's ratings remained high during the first years following the war but critics, who had been praising his show now began to desert him. By the time Bob stopped doing the shows from military bases in 1948, audiences had begun deserting him as well. For whatever the reason Bob's was the first of the top

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network comedies to lose his audience to television.

In an effort to recapture some of that lost audience, Hope made many changes to the program throughout the late 40's. He switched bandleaders hiring Les Brown to replace Skinnay Ennis. He also dropped Jerry Colonna and Barbara Jo Allen and hired singer Doris Day to give the show a fresher youthful image.

If anything, these changes did more harm than good. The rapport Bob had built up with his cast was gone now and the quality of the show dropped because of it.

In all fairness to Hope, other radio shows were encountering the same problems. They too were changing in an effort to combat the loss of their audience to television. Their attempts would have no effect though and the ratings of all shows continued to drop.

Although ratings continued to plummet, advertisers still pumped money into radio in a last ditch effort to rejuvenate it. Bob became the recipient of a great deal of that money when, in 1953, he

signed a contract with General Foods for \$2 million. Bob would continue to do his thirty-minute evening show and also appear Monday thru Friday in a fifteen-minute morning show. It was a novel and successful experiment that lasted for five years before Bob finally called it quits from radio in 1958.

Television was where the future was and by the time his radio show ended Bob had already established himself as a star in that medium as well.

Bob approached television in a different manner than the majority of other radio comedians. Instead of appearing on a weekly basis, Bob signed an agreement with NBC to appear in a series of specials each season.

There were several reasons why Bob didn't want to do a weekly television series. The first and foremost of which was the fact that Bob simply didn't have the time. What with continuing his radio show, appearing in movies and touring with the USO Bob had enough trouble just meeting his contractual obligations to television.

Even if Bob had the time he would not have wanted to do it for fear of over-exposing himself to television viewers. Bob's judgement in this regard proved correct as he was continuing to do his specials long after his radio counterparts had ended their television careers. Even today, at age 82, Bob continues to do some four television specials each year and each one draws a large audience.

Bob Hope has had the kind of career that most entertainers only dream about. He has succeeded at everything he has ever attempted. Bob even has one of the few successful marriages in Hollywood. He and his wife Dolores have been happily married for 51 years.

Bob still maintains a rigorous schedule. He frequently performs at veterans hospitals, handles numerous speaking engagements and continues his television career. He shows no sign of slowing down. Here's hoping he never does.