

# 'FATHER' CROSBY'S CAREER...

BY DENNIS H. CREMIN

It is the Christmas season, and no one better brings a radio listener into the yuletide spirit as well as Bing Crosby.

His recording of Irving Berlin's "White Christmas," released in 1942, remains the biggest individual hit of all time as well as a seasonal favorite. "White Christmas," as sung by Bing not only calls to mind the Christmas season, but it also brings back memories of the Second World War, for which the song served as an unofficial anthem. As we continue to commemorate the war and its radio programs, we can also remember Crosby whose career reached its zenith during World War II, leading the entertainment fields of records, radio, and movies.

Henry Lillis Crosby, better known as Bing, was born in Tacoma, Washington, on May 2, 1903, to Harry Lowe and Catherine Helen Crosby. The family was poor but when Bing was young they relocated to Spokane, Washington and the family's fortunes improved. In time, Crosby attended Gonzaga University

and had thoughts of pursuing a law degree. While at the university, however, he became active in a jazz band with his friend Al Rinker. The two friends, after a good amount of local success with their band, decided to try to hit it big in Hollywood. They quit school in 1924 and drove to Los Angeles.

Dedicated to a career in entertainment, Crosby worked various club dates until he became in 1927 one of Paul Whiteman's Rhythm Boys and went on tour. The band provided Bing with a chance to gain greater notice in the entertainment field. Unfortunately, Crosby gained as much notoriety for his drinking and carousing as for his crooning. In the early 1930's he left the Whiteman band to embark on a solo career.

Bing reformed himself a bit in the 1930's. Undoubtedly his marriage was the foundation of this change, the public wooing of his future wife by singing "I Surrender, Dear" marking the shift. He married film actress Dixie Lee (Wilma W. Wyatt), who did not want to marry a "playboy," and Crosby's life settled down. He also formed "Bing Crosby, Inc." which removed control of his finances to his brother Everett, making it possible for Bing to pay off the bills he had accrued as a result of his dissolute 1920's lifestyle.

In the early 1930's Crosby's career clearly was ascending. He began to make records and sing with various bands, and in 1931 he started to work in radio, most notably for shows sponsored by Woodbury Soap and Chester-

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## ... AND WORLD WAR II



BING CROSBY

field Cigarettes. In the late 1930's, he was managed by Jack Kapp, who expanded Bing's career beyond jazz, or rhythm music, toward music of all kinds. Under Kapp's guidance Crosby turned his attention to songs ranging from popular standards to religious songs and even to children's songs, all of which met with general public approval. The union with Kapp resulted in a huge number of recordings, and Bing became a musical "everyman," who seemed to believe that every song is a good song. What set Crosby apart, however, was his ability to give every tune, even the weakest material, a soulful, reputable treatment.

By the middle of the 1930's, Crosby's colleagues within the profession and the public at large regarded him as a fine musician despite the fact that he could not read music. Not much has been writ-

ten about him musicologically, resulting perhaps from what some have called his "natural" style and his lack of much formal study of music. Bing echoed this kind of statement when he suggested that the secret to his success was that:

*Every man who sees one of my movies or who listens to my records or who hears me on the radio, believes firmly that he sings as well as I do, especially when he's in the bathroom shower. It's no trick for him to believe this, because I have none of the mannerisms of a trained singer and I have very little voice.*

The "natural" style may have resulted from Crosby's artful use of the microphone. The "mike" resulted in an unaffected, natural singing style that is Bing's legacy to other singers. His singing style comes close to natural spoken speech rhythms and intonations, especially when compared to the highly trained voices of his era. Crosby's voice became better over his career as he became more conscious of dynamics and as he made more recordings and continued his broadcasting career.

During the swing era, Bing may well have been *the* most influential vocalist. "All the singers tried to be Crosbys," pointed out Englishman Sam Costa. "You were either a high Crosby or a low Crosby, and we all had that quaver in the voice." Crosby was popular before swing, however, and after it as well. In addition, Bing worked with many of the biggest names in swing, including the Dorseys, Miller, Berigan, and Goodman as their own careers were rising.

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roduce a "memory song" with a dramatized skit. One such song was "Melancholy Baby." Other songs included on the show were "Humpty Dumpty Heart," "Chattanooga Choo Choo" and "Home on the Range," the last tune aired on the January 29, 1942 show. This show was important as it was one of the first shows relayed via short-wave to General MacArthur's troops. The shortwave broadcasts continued throughout the war and reached the troops wherever they were fighting. Although KMH was already broadcast throughout America, rebroadcasting made the show's potential audience larger than it already was. The program bolstered morale by providing the troops entertainment with a clear message of the values of hearth and home. In this way the "Kraft Music Hall" promoted a victory abroad which reflected half of the double "v" of victory, victory at home and abroad.

"Kraft Music Hall" also reflected the domestic part of the double "v," as in addition to the famous guests, the show included during the war members of the U.S. Armed Forces, whose interviews with Crosby provided wartime advice to the public such as when "Major John S. Winch of the United State Marine Corps offered valuable information on what to do in the event of bombing," or when "an anti-aircraft officer from the harbor defenses at Fort McArthur answered Bing's pertinent questions on air raid precautions." In this way, KMH provided information to the community about military operations that was practical for them but also gave them general information about what the enlisted men were experiencing. As the article in *Cheesekraft*, the in house publication of Kraft Corporation, put it:

*Like a letter from home,  
the short wave broadcasts of*

*the Kraft Music Hall are  
always cheerful and buoyant,  
never teary or over-senti-  
mental. Each week, at the  
opening of the show, Bing  
sings one of the official songs  
of some branch of the service  
- sings it directly for and to  
the men, and for the millions  
at home marching in spirit  
beside them.*

Thus, the radio show served as a link between the people at home and those enlisted.

Though entertainment was important, the reason for KMH's existence was to sell things, primarily Kraft products such as Parkay Margarine or Velveeta Cheese. During the war, however, the show was also "helping to build morale, devoting much time to the cause of selling United States savings stamps and bonds, the Red Cross, and to other important phases of the wartime program."

Crosby's personal life and commitment to the war effort took him away from the microphone for long periods of the war. Yet, the show continued with various people filling in as the Master of Ceremonies, such as Bing's brother Bob Crosby or later, in 1944, George Murphy. The frequent absence of Crosby from the microphone was to help bring about the controversy that disrupted the broadcast of the show towards the end of the war. Crosby wanted to be able to record, or "transcribe," his broadcasts, arguing that he could record several shows during a one week period and then be free to pursue other activities. Kraft objected to this concept. As Bing himself pointed out, nobody liked the idea of recording the radio shows, not "the networks, the sponsors of other shows, the advertising agencies. They thought it might hurt the network financially. They felt that if entertainers were allowed to record,



**BING CROSBY** with his sons, from left, Gary, Dennis, Phillip, and Lindsay

they could sell to individual stations instead of having to use the network.” Yet, up to this point, almost all radio shows were live, unless there were extenuating circumstances. Kraft objected to recording the show, fearing that some of the punch and immediacy of the show would be lost.

Yet, there had already been the musicians’ strike, during which Crosby was able to record ten or twelve shows during a two week period. Thus, a precedent for recording shows was already in place. The controversy finally ended with Bing fulfilling his contract with Kraft in 1945, then moving on to Philco Corporation, which allowed him to pre-record his shows with the stipulation that if the show should drop below a certain percentage of audience share, Crosby or Philco could drop the show,

or make the show into a live show format.

Alongside his recording and radio career, Bing Crosby’s most long lasting images are from movies. It is perhaps in film where Bing’s success is unparalleled. The crossover of singers to the screen has not always met with success. Yet Crosby, during and after the Second World War, was “the world’s No. 1 box-office personality for five consecutive years — 1944 to 1949.” In addition, “no less than twenty-nine of Crosby’s films — from 1934 to 1964 — figured in the top grossing list of their respective years.”

His contract with Paramount during the war was for a maximum of three films a year. It was during this time that he started filming the highly successful “road” pictures which also starred Bob



“ROAD” PICTURE TEAMMATES Bob Hope, Dorothy Lamour and Bing Crosby

The confusion was not unusual as Crosby received letters from all over the world asking him to visit them for a while and form little singing groups for children to keep them out of trouble the way he had done in *Going My Way*. Crosby continued to make films after *Going My Way*, but he is always remembered best for his role of Father O'Malley (which he also played in the 1946 sequel, *Bells of St. Mary's*).

Somewhat separated from his work, but of equal importance, is his role as a father in his private life. In 1945 Crosby was named by the national Father's Day Committee the number one Screen Father. Despite later reports of problems at home, especially in light of memoirs of his sons, Crosby

appeared to the public in the 1940's as the perfect father. He made time for his family, was successful, and even owned two ideal American ranch homes.

Bing Crosby's work in the 1940's is unparalleled. His dominance of the primary fields of entertainment may never again be rivaled. Undoubtedly, the role of father, of a kind, understanding, and encouraging, optimistic man, especially during World War II, played a role in his popularity. He consistently made Americans believe they were the best, and that things, however bad they might seem now, were sure to work out. He also promoted the values of home which were worth fighting for and preserving. ■