

RADIO'S MOST ELUSIVE STAR

BY RICHARD W. O'DONNELL

One minute he was Kay Kyser, the celebrated "Old Professor" of show business. Everybody knew him.

The next, he was gone. It was as though he had evaporated, or never really existed at all. But he did. The last three decades of his remarkable life were spent away from the spotlight doing other productive and rewarding work.



Kay Kyser was a big time star. He was a band

leader, and a smash hit when his *Kollege of Musical Knowledge* went on the air in 1938. He was also the first band leader who became a major star in the movies, and he brought his entire band with him. Later, he was a television favorite.

And then, all of a sudden, he announced his retirement during the early fifties, when he was only in his forties.

To appreciate the story of Kay Kyser, one must realize, even though he achieved great success during the big band era, he yearned to live out his life in his native North Carolina.

James King Kern Kyser was born on June 18, 1906. He had so many *Ks* in his name, friends started calling him Kay, and the nickname stuck.

When he was only twenty, he formed his own band while attending the University of North Carolina. This was quite an achievement when you realize Kyser did not play a musical instrument; nor did he



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ever play one. His success with the band was based on the fact he was a born leader, and ran a happy ship.

For almost a decade, "Kay Kyser and his Orchestra" survived by playing college functions. Then, in the mid-thirties, the group hit the big time and started playing at major hotels. For four years the band did radio remotes, but never attracted any attention.

Success came in 1938 when Kyser came up with a radio show known as *The Kollege of Musical Knowledge*. It was a fun-loving quiz show during which contestants from the studio audience had a chance to win prizes by answering questions about

Richard W. O'Donnell is a free-lance writer from Port Richey, Florida.

KAY KYSER'S COLLEGE OF MUSICAL KNOWLEDGE



SULLY MASON, EDDIE SHEA, KAY KYSER, HARRY BABBITT, ISH-KABIBBLE

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popular songs of the day. The show was on the Mutual network briefly, before it became a smash hit in the ratings when it moved over to NBC and was sponsored on Wednesday nights by Lucky Strike Cigarettes.

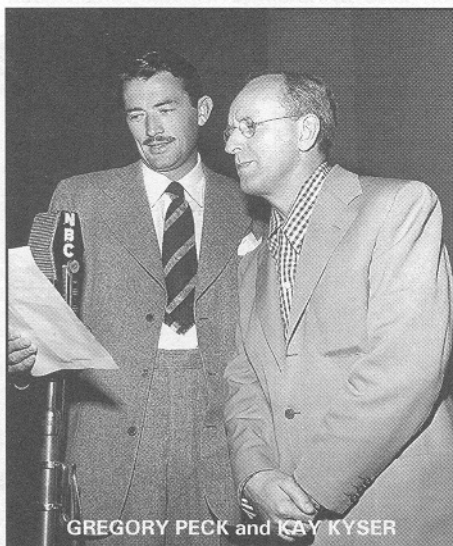
Kyser became a major star in a hurry. He would delight his studio audience by coming on stage wearing a cap and gown. After all, he *was* "The Old Professor." And members of his band wore beanies and campus-style sweaters with letters on them.

"Evenin' folks," he'd greet his listeners in a charming southern drawl, "how ya' all?"

And that was the start of one of the most successful shows in radio history. Kyser had a ready wit, and questions would be asked. Mostly they were on the humorous, often silly side. The band would get into the act by playing musical questions. In between the questions and the commercials, the musicians would also play popular songs, both old and new.

And what a band it was! Ginny Simms, the female vocalist, went on to become a

great favorite with servicemen everywhere during the World War II years. Harry Babbitt, Sully Mason and Mike Douglas (who hit it big on TV years later) were the male singers. For a while the King Sisters (who also became TV stars) were with Kyser. And "Ish Kabibble," sort of an early Jerry Lewis, became a household name by sing-



GREGORY PECK and KAY KYSER

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RADIO'S KAY KYSER

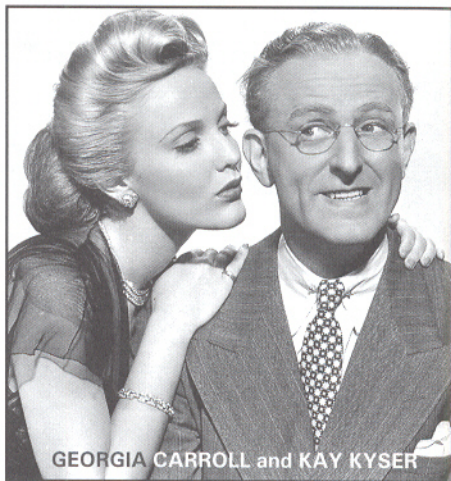
ing novelty songs. Kabibble's real name was Merwyn A. Bogue. It is interesting to note that most of the original Kyser band stayed with him during all the years of the group's long life.

On June 7, 1944 Kyser married Georgia Carroll, one of the most famous and beautiful fashion models in the nation. She appeared with the band on the air for a while, but gave up her modeling career.

Then came the movies. And Kyser wasn't just another orchestra leader fronting his band while the hero and heroine solved their problems. Kyser, a natural comic, was the star of the show. His comedy sense was great, and band members played their roles too.

Starting in 1939, when he signed on with RKO, "The Old Professor" made a picture a year. In order, they included *That's Right, You're Wrong, You'll Find Out, My Favorite Spy, Around the World, Swing Fever, and Carolina Blues*.

Then Kay Kyser stopped making movies and never returned to them. There was a war on and he took his band to military posts all around the world. It has been



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estimated he did more shows from camps, bases, and hospitals than even Bob Hope. In all, he performed more than 550 of these shows.

When the war ended, Kyser limited himself to his radio shows and brief theatrical tours. He had been doing the radio show and was making movies whenever he was not playing the military posts.

He remained on the air, with high ratings, until 1949. By then television had arrived and during the 1950s, Kyser brought his *Kollege of Musical Knowledge*

to daytime TV and it, too, earned high ratings. He probably could have stayed with the show on TV for any number of years but, much to everybody's surprise, he announced he was retiring from show business. And so he did.

Tennessee Ernie Ford tried his hand at presiding over the *Kollege* on TV but, without Kyser, the



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show did not last for long.

When Kay quit show business, he and wife Georgia moved to Chapel Hill, North Carolina where they raised their three daughters, Kimberly, Carroll and Amanda.

And Kyser, "The Old Professor" of yesteryear who had been in show business for more than a quarter of a century, started a new life.

"When Kay retired from show business," recalled Georgia Carroll Kyser in a recent interview, "he told me he was never going back to it again. He told me he wanted to do something different, to lead a conventional life. And I must say, he kept his word."

In his home state, the retired radio and TV star did public service work for the state. "He helped to get the state's 'good health program' established. He was quite involved in that. And he worked on other state projects."

During the late sixties and early seventies, Kyser spent five years working in Boston for the Christian Science Church. "He commuted every week from North Carolina," said Georgia. "He'd be home on weekends and for important holidays and anniversaries, of course, but he spent most of his time up in Massachusetts, where he was in charge of the church's radio and TV department."

By then the entertainer was known as James Kyser. He was often approached for interviews by the media, but never granted one.



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After his Boston years, he returned home to North Carolina where he worked on the development of the state's PBS program for a number of years.

"My husband never went before the cameras or did any radio work," said his widow. "He worked behind the scenes and he enjoyed what he was doing."

She added: "My husband wanted a different life. When he quit show business, he quit completely. He never regretted the move."

Of late, it should be noted, there has been a revival of interest in Kay Kyser because the American Movie Classics cable channel has played some of his movies. And there is talk there will be a documentary about the radio star.

He may have left show business, but the memories of his famous Wednesday night show still linger. It was one of radio's most popular programs and may well have been the most popular quiz show ever on the airwaves. ■

NOTE— Tune in TWTD January 2 and 16 to hear broadcasts of Kay Kyser's Kollege of Musical Knowledge.