

THE QUINTESSENTIAL SUBSTITUTE HOST

ROBERT Q. LEWIS

BY JIM COX

Radio historiographer John Dunning's succinct appraisal of the career of entertainer Robert Q. Lewis is that "Lewis was primed for bigger things that never quite happened." As is the case in similar assessments, Dunning may well have hit the nail on the head.

The bespectacled Lewis—a physical feature that, incidentally, gave him a recognized trademark—was a man who appeared to hold promise that was never fulfilled. Although he would regularly substitute for some of the foremost performers on the air—Arthur Godfrey, Bing Crosby, Ed Sullivan and Jackie Gleason among them—Lewis never achieved their levels of notoriety and success.

Some of the handicaps that held him back were of his own personal limitations. But even more blame can probably be affixed to the environment in which he emerged. He clearly confirmed his potential for spellbinding audiences and habitually had them eating from his hand. His strong suit was a gift of patter that was well received by adoring fans. "As a disc jockey, he was a natural," said *TV Radio Mirror*. The quipster's snappy comebacks left listeners rollicking on the floor, turning what

otherwise might be serious matters into trivialized fluff. (*Variety* lauded his "high IQ humor.") That ability was coupled with an engaging, effervescent personality that permitted Lewis to develop a loyal corps of followers that travelled with him from venue to venue.

Yet after a few years of trying to establish himself as an up-and-coming performer in dual mediums, fate intervened on two accounts. His growing popularity in radio never accomplished its ultimate potential, for he arrived on that scene just as the aural medium's wealth was starting to slide. While he persevered nearly to the end of the golden age, he never really connected with numbers that could significantly boost his stock and make his name a household word as it might have only a few years earlier.

When CBS attempted, in several tries, to shift his talent to television, he found himself competing against multiple performers with far greater recognition for the same audiences. Arthur Godfrey, Garry Moore, Art Linkletter and a few others of their ilk were already firmly entrenched with daytime viewers as favored series hosts.

Lewis who, by his own admission, was an average vocalist (he once labeled himself "the worst singer on radio" although he was equal to or better than many), and an even worse dancer and actor, had to rely almost entirely on his ability to deliver humor. "For all his love of show business, he couldn't really sing, couldn't really

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Robert Q. Lewis

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Lewis – whose real surname was Goldberg – was the son of a successful attorney whose own theatrical ambitions had terminated with college dramatics. Continuing to harbor a deep love for the stage, however, the senior Lewis imbued his son with a similar awe and respect for things theatrical. As the lad grew toward adolescence, his father would take him to Saturday matinee performances at New York theaters. Young Bob viewed the experience as “an escape from life,” alleged a magazine reviewer. There he entered “a story-book world where heroines were like princesses, villains were evil and wore black moustaches, heroes were pure in heart and wore square jaws.”

dance – and enthusiasm was no substitute for talent,” argued one pundit. “As for acting, audiences weren’t yet ready for leading men who wore glasses – or for comics who didn’t look funny.” Besides the jesting, he later pushed forward the talented members of a closely-knit troupe that he assembled around him.

It wasn’t enough to sustain prominence, however. After several attempts he left television altogether to concentrate on his “first love,” radio, where audiences were bailing out as if it were the Titanic during the mid-1950s. For Lewis, it was a case of too little, too late. The potential he offered was never completely realized. Yet despite all the obstacles and misfortunes, in his halcyon days he still evidenced a noteworthy showmanship that landed him some golden opportunities that few other wannabes ever enjoyed.

Born in Manhattan on April 25, 1921,

The boy’s fascination with those trappings led to a conviction that he somehow would personally become a part of it. He began by singing in children’s radio shows. He devoted childhood summers to organizing and operating a kids’ theater in the garage behind the Lewis dwelling at Rockville Center, Long Island. On graduating from De Witt Clinton High School the youth specialized in dramatics courses at the University of Michigan. He added the initial “Q” to his name – signifying nothing – so he could stand out in people’s minds.

During that time he was able to gain a berth as a disc jockey at a Detroit radio station where he perfected the gift of gab and ad-lib. His first real job following graduation took him in 1941 to Troy, New York, where he was employed by station WTRY. They “let him be as versatile as all get-out,” according to a pulp reviewer. He announced, wrote and read fairy tales to

kiddies and was addressed as "Uncle Bob" in the latter capacity. Within a few months, however, Uncle Sam came calling and "Uncle Bob" joined his great uncle's Army.

Lewis, an asthma sufferer since childhood, was sick throughout what became a prolonged ordeal. While extensive patient treatment with the best physicians available to him had virtually cured his chronic childhood illness, he contracted double pneumonia soon after entering the service. It triggered an asthmatic relapse. By the end of 1942 the Army's high command was weary of shipping him from one clinic to another and promptly discharged him from active duty.

Perhaps as a result of his debilitating experience there, a decade later Lewis became a highly visible crusader against painful breathing, becoming particularly focused on helping youngsters in that fight. By the mid-1950s he was named an honorary chairman of the Denver-based non-sectarian Jewish National Home for Asthmatic Children. Coincidentally, he also served as Greater New York chairman of the National Foundation for Muscular Dystrophy. Throughout his professional career, in fact, Lewis accepted opportunities that funneled some of his energies toward charitable causes while seeking to gain mass support for them.

Following his release from the service, Lewis returned to New York City, where he was hired by a small, obscure radio station. Within a couple of years he came to the attention of NBC executives, who signed him to a contract. The chain put him on the air on Saturday evenings at 7:30 (all times Eastern) in a three-month trial run that began April 7, 1945. By August 6 he was linked with Jack Arthur in an 8 a.m. weekday comedy feature. But Lewis didn't last. By December 29 he was gone.

One version of his abrupt departure suggested he was fired for ripostes that poked

fun at NBC vice presidents, an aberration that frequently got Fred Allen called on the carpet for similar transgressions. But Lewis attributed his brief hiatus at NBC to performing too many duties simultaneously: He was writing, producing and acting at the same time.

Nonetheless, the following year he acquired another network stint. On May 18, 1946 he started hosting a musical variety series, *The Saturday Night Revue*, at 8:30 over MBS. It featured Bill Harrington, Vera Holly, Elsa Mirande, Art Tatum and Henny Youngman. John Gart's Orchestra accompanied and Ted Brown announced. (The latter would become an important presence on NBC's *Monitor* down the road.) But the show left the ether just four weeks into it, on June 8.

Retreating to local radio, Lewis was picked up by a major New York independent outlet, WHN, which soon had him spinning platters and chatting humorously between turns. It seemed like a classic fit. In those months he reportedly played Ted Weems' remake recording of "Heartaches," the popular hit from the early 1930s, so frequently that he contributed substantially toward reprising the tune nationally.

During his brief sojourn at WHN yet a third network came calling, one that in time was to offer him the sustained national exposure for which he so desperately hungered. In 1948 *Radio Album* acknowledged that he was discovered "running wild" on a local New York station "theoretically handling a disc jockey's chores."

A journalist suggested that it was CBS owner-chairman William S. Paley himself who must be credited with "discovering" Lewis. Paley "happened to tune in to a free-wheeling disc jockey on a local New York station." *TV-Radio Annual* recalled in 1958: "Once he [Lewis] was persuaded it was really the head of the network calling him, he quickly signed on the dotted line



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and has worked for CBS, in TV and radio, ever since." To CBS, which was sorely lacking comics at the time, "Lewis looked like the answer to a prayer," a critic confirmed.

CBS Radio gave Lewis national exposure at 7:30 on Saturday evenings starting May 3, 1947 on a program titled *The Little Show*. Lewis and a silent backstage partner, Doctor of Satire radio writer Goodman Ace of *Easy Aces* fame, "proved that you don't need a studio audience for comedy." Ace quickly became disenchanted with their effort, however, when – only a month into it – CBS took a "tight little 15-minute job" according to Ace and turned it into "just another splashy half-hour, with orchestra and trimmings." Backed by Milton Kaye's band, the revamped series included performers Jackson Beck, William Keene and Florence Robinson. At that point it shifted to Fridays at 8:30 p.m.

Lewis began a long ride of transferring from multiple slots in the CBS schedule, wherever an opening occurred. His comedy-variety programs, under varied monikers – most prominently including his own name plus *The Show Goes On* and *Waxworks* (the latter series a record-spinning

vehicle with guest interviews) – were slotted into late afternoon, early evening, late night, Friday night, Saturday morning and Sunday afternoon time periods. He was the embodiment of and a prime reason for the adage "Check your local newspaper for time and station."

Before long Lewis was delivering puns to CBS listeners five afternoons weekly. Then a watershed occurred in his career – absolutely marking his single most important "big break." Surprisingly, he was tapped to substitute for CBS's prime moneymaker, Arthur Godfrey, as host of his morning show, *Arthur Godfrey Time*. It occurred during the Old Redhead's month-long vacation between April 23 and May 23, 1947. People who had never heard of Lewis were suddenly smitten by the charming wisecracking Jewish bachelor who regaled listeners with one-liners evoking riotous laughter. He "registered well with Godfrey's corn-fed audience," assessed a pundit. "After that, he was a made man," another reporter conjectured.

While his revelation on the Godfrey show translated into subsequent broadcasting venues, the acclaim he acquired there resulting from his exposure to vast national audiences is worth deliberation. By 1953 *TV Radio Annual* reported that Lewis had already substituted for Godfrey no fewer than 17 times. Annually he would fill in for CBS's most high profile personality every time the Great One took an extended vacation, usually for six consecutive weeks or more every year and also during random absences.

Lewis's sharp wit shone brilliantly every time out. On those occasions he would engage Godfrey's bass-voiced announcer, the erudite Tony Marvin, in witty repartee. In between numbers he would joust with singers Jan Davis, The Mariners, The Chordettes, bandleader Archie Bleyer and other members of the morning show com-

pany. Though his wisecracks were unpredictable, they ran a practiced gamut from joke to joke.

He once posted this personal classified ad on the air: *Wanted . . . Wife. By radio humorist just over draft age. Girl must be breathing, anywhere between ages of 20 and 21. Should have poise, charm, ability, personality and oil well. If possible send picture of oil well. Box Q.* When he got a reply he informed Marvin that the photo was “messy” – it was “oily all over.”

Recalling the incident for a fan magazine, Lewis admitted: “I haven’t gotten many responses from the ad. . . . Ten percent of the replies I did get were from girls who were underage. But the other 90 percent came from girls who were under observation.”

Lewis, who was engaged at least twice, suggested that “a wife might know a better way to clean out the refrigerator – what I do is to take everything out and eat it, which doesn’t seem right.” (In 1954 *TV Radio Mirror* announced that he was “one of the most sought-after bachelors of all time, averaging some 150 proposals a week.” It further noted that during the wedding month of June “the figure jumps to 400 a week. And not all the proposals come by mail!”)

Substituting for Godfrey, Lewis interspersed his banter and the vocals by the Little Godfreys (cast regulars) with an occasional ditty of his own, typically one per day. Bleyer’s orchestra and The Mariners male quartet normally accompanied him. Some of his numbers were old standards like “Getting to Know You,” “Hard-Hearted Hannah,” “Once in Love with Amy” and “I’m in Love with You, Honey.” But he often turned to lighthearted fare like “I’m in Love with the Mother of the Girl I Love” about a daddy devoted to his three-year-old daughter as well as his wife, “If I Give Up the Saxophone Will You Come Back to

Me?” and “Ain’t You Coming Out, Melinda?” He informed a reporter that he sang on his shows by request. “By request of a charming little old lady,” he said. “My mother.”

By 1950, having genuinely pleased the CBS brass and possibly Godfrey, too – although there is no hint that the two men developed much personal rapport – Lewis was secure enough to occasionally refer to the 90-minute weekday Godfrey bash as “my show.” He undoubtedly did so tongue-in-cheek but the audience loved it just the same.

On July 31 that year he recalled to millions tuning in, “I was on a boat for a couple of days. I just wanted to get some sunshine and rest before I came back to my morning show.” The hundred or more guests in the house giggled hysterically. A few days later, on August 10, he told this story on his secretary, Gloria Dolshin, while shifting back-and-forth addressing audience, Gloria and the show’s gagwriters, all of whom were present:

“When I come back to my show every summer [*audience laughter*] the mail starts coming in again. And we love to hear from you, we really do. But it’s gonna take a while – a long while – for us to get the letters answered. You see, it takes Gloria a long, long while to . . . get down the answers in shorthand and then answer ’em. So please bear with us. We *do* love to hear from you. [*Addresses Gloria:*] Gloria, remember what I told you about that thing, will you? [*To audience:*] This girl is impossible. Whenever she puts a piece of stationery in the typewriter, you know she types one line and at the end of the line the bell rings – she goes out to lunch! [*Audience laughter; To Gloria:*] That’s not the luncheon bell, Gloria. Gracious me! [*To audience:*] We once had a fire drill and she ordered a sandwich! [*Audience and Lewis burst into uproarious guffaws*] I just



made that one up. [To gagwriters:] Writers, go home!"

As television became a part of the Godfrey programming scheme, Lewis's introduction to visual audiences seemed assured. It became an integral part of his substituting chores, in fact. By the 1950s some or all of CBS Radio's *Arthur Godfrey Time* was also televised live by that chain four mornings a week. (Godfrey took Fridays off from TV to visit his Virginia farm, airing only the radio show from there. Garry Moore televised an extended show in that time period on Fridays.) Godfrey's was one of the early simulcasts of a live broadcast series.

Lewis also regularly substituted for Godfrey at various program rehearsals. In recalling the events surrounding Godfrey's infamous firing of popular vocalist Julius LaRosa while on the air on October 19, 1953 – the start of a long series of artist sackings that quickly eroded Godfrey's favorable image – *Radio Life's* Jack Holland recalled a stressful rehearsal earlier that week. Godfrey was absent while Lewis filled in for him. The McGuire Sisters repetitively practiced a number. Hol-

land noted that LaRosa observed the proceedings while appearing quite morose. "You could feel his impatience, his trigger-like tension," he wrote.

Perhaps because Lewis wasn't a part of the official Godfrey entourage (the Little Godfreys) – you recall that he had been brought in by the CBS hierarchy, not Godfrey himself – the press never speculated whether Lewis was "about to go" as it did with most of the rest of the cast. If Lewis and Godfrey ever exchanged cross words such incidents were kept hidden from view. As an insatiable media uncovered more and more behind-the-scenes friction in the Godfrey camp, it soon revealed those details to a public that regularly fed from sensationalized headlines. Had Lewis ever been in serious trouble it almost surely would have been widely covered. But no such stories ever surfaced.

The fact is that Lewis's stock appeared to climb, instead of diminish, both with Godfrey and with the public. Godfrey took an extended hiatus in the spring and summer of 1953 to undergo a hip arthroplasty, stemming from pain he experienced following an automobile accident two decades earlier. Lewis quite naturally assumed the reins of the morning show over that lengthy period during Godfrey's surgery and recovery. In addition, he was one of several tapped as visiting hosts of the hour-long live *Arthur Godfrey and His Friends* show over CBS-TV on Wednesday night.

Later, when cancer surgery removed Godfrey from the airwaves between the spring and autumn seasons of 1959, there was Lewis on the docket again for the morning radio show. (Humorist Sam Levenson handled the TV portion on that occasion.) After a dozen years the effervescent, ever-dependable Lewis was still comfortable as Godfrey's second banana, the consummate right hand, a role he obviously relished and continued to excel at.

Lewis occupied several diverse bachelor pads at varying times that were scattered around Manhattan. One was a two-room penthouse; another, a spacious duplex apartment offering a “breathtaking view” of the East River; still another sported a huge terrace that he claimed could double as “an outdoor living room in good weather.” His varied residences were profiled through numerous image-building articles appearing in popular fanzines during the late 1940s and the 1950s. Lewis obviously enjoyed entertaining and was comfortable hosting groups of friends on a regular basis. One writer stated that he had guests over for supper “almost every night.”

A focal point of his domicile was a large tropical fish tank. He routinely haunted art exhibitions, adding to a collection of French impressionist paintings that he adored and displayed proudly. He bought lots of books and found them absorbing. He was an eccentric collector of diverse objects including baby elephants, shaving mugs, cuff links, turn-of-the-century postcards, rare recordings which he played for guests, totem poles and feathered head-dresses – virtually anything with a pronounced Indian accent, in fact – plus cameras, old theatrical and circus posters, clown paintings and figurines, playbills and lots of other showbiz memorabilia. Until the late 1950s he harbored a consuming passion for acquiring things, loved to travel and frequently combined the two.

Only when he moved to a more contemporary cooperative apartment did he begin to divest himself of many of those articles and refocus some of his interests. But he remained a fanatical adherent of the Brooklyn (later, L. A.) Dodgers baseball club. A reporter also wrote that Lewis, himself, was “the pet of more fan clubs than he can count.”

Cope Robinson, now retired in North

Carolina, worked for Newell-Emmett in those days, the sole advertising agency for the Liggett & Myers Tobacco Company. L&M was one of Godfrey’s leading sponsors. In his official capacity Robinson was required to attend all of the Chesterfield programs that L&M underwrote, which included multiple Godfrey venues. That brought him into contact with Lewis on a fairly regular basis and the two men got to know one another socially as well as professionally. “It was very much the whim of Liggett & Myers to intermix our stable of ‘stars’ on their various radio programs,” Robinson recalls. “Chesterfield spent an inordinate amount of advertising money in New York, the number one market in that brand’s sales.”

Robinson remembers that the sponsor once required Lewis, while subbing for Godfrey, to put in an appearance at a Columbia University-Amherst College football game broadcast that it underwrote emanating from Baker Field on a Saturday afternoon. He went by Lewis’s hotel apartment to accompany him. They had a drink and a quick lunch and lots of cigarettes before taking a taxi to the stadium. There Lewis bantered back-and-forth on the air with announcer Marty Glickman, a former University of Syracuse athlete and Olympian track star, who was currently calling the Columbia plays.

Robinson described Lewis as “about as glib as they come and very much at home without a script.” He also remembers that Amherst had a player named Snodgrass whose name or actions on the field caused Lewis and Robinson to chuckle. “I don’t believe that Lewis made anything of the name on the air, for that was not his style – not a mean bone in his body,” said Robinson. “Years later the name was still a buzz word between us.”

Lewis would have many other experiences on the air. While he may not have



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been “the savior of CBS comedy,” a sobriquet coined by John Dunning, it certainly wasn’t for lack of effort, either on his part or the network’s.

For more than four months in 1950 (May 31-October 4) he was CBS Radio’s replacement for vacationing crooner Bing Crosby, another Liggett & Myers personality. That summer’s show was titled *The ABCs of Music*.

Lewis had already been Godfrey’s summertime replacement on *Arthur Godfrey’s Talent Scouts* on both CBS Radio and Television. He prided himself, in fact, on giving a break to young talent. “Half the fun of my own career has come from discovering new personalities with a flair for comedy, or fresh new voices, or new acts,” he told an interviewer.

Soon he landed his own CBS-TV series with a similar theme, *The Show Goes On*, an outgrowth of the radio feature by the same title. Debuting on January 19, 1950, the format presented young hopefuls performing for a cadre of scouts (agents, producers and stars) who appraised their acts and signed their picks for theater and nightclub bookings. Talent included acrobats, vocalists, ventriloquists and comics. The

series continued mostly on Thursday nights in various 30- and 60-minute time slots through February 16, 1952.

For his televised appearances Lewis, wearing thick-rimmed spectacles, his characteristic trademark, was normally attired in business suit, white shirt and bow tie. He chain-smoked, a habit that undoubtedly pleased Liggett & Myers, whose name was frequently linked with his.

Overlapping this same epoch, Lewis surfaced as the host of another televised outing over CBS, *The Robert Q. Lewis Show*. This Sunday night quarter-hour, essentially a humorous chat with guest stars and individuals who had unusual occupations, premiered on July 16, 1950. Six months later, on January 7, 1951, it was history.

Meanwhile, between October 16, 1950 and January 19, 1951 he presided over yet another series, *Robert Q’s Matinee*, a 60-minute weekday variety series that was reduced to 45 minutes within a few weeks, visibly irritating Lewis. Appearing with him there were Tony Craig, Rosemary Clooney, the Daydreamers, Joan Fields, Hal Lohman and the Bernie Leighton Orchestra.

A short time later Lewis expanded his television horizons to the ABC-TV network, his fourth national chain employer. Beginning December 5, 1951 and continuing into early 1954 he hosted the live Goodson-Todman game show *The Name’s the Same*. On it a celebrity panel sought to pinpoint a contestant’s moniker, which frequently corresponded with a well-known event or famous personality.

Yet his most prestigious and successful experience on the tube in his own right was in a second run under the appellation *The Robert Q. Lewis Show*. Launched over CBS-TV on January 11, 1954, it was another weekday variety series, yet with a “family feeling” that included an ongoing cast of regulars. For the first time he, too,

interacted with a group of continuing performers similar to the format of the Godfrey show in its heyday.

The talented contingent, although not all present at the same time, included The Ames Brothers, Jan Arden, Eugenie Baird, Jackson Beck, The Chordettes, Betty Clooney, Toby David, Merv Griffin, Richard Hayes, Lois Hunt, Judy Johnson, William Keene, Phil Kramer, Don Liberto, The Mixed Choir, Jaye P. Morgan, Kathy Norman, Florence Robinson, Herb Sheldon, Billy Williams, Jane Wilson, Julann Wright, Earl Wrightson and Bill Wyatt. Several were on their way up. Few had had much exposure before that opportunity.

Lewis touted his announcer, Lee Vines, as comparable to the well-recognized Tony Marvin, Godfrey's man. When Vines wasn't there, Kenneth Banghart or Warren Sweeney pinch-hit. For most of the run Ray Bloch directed the orchestra. Supplanting him were Dave Grupp, Lee Irwin, Milton Kaye, Howard Smith and George Wright.

The show maintained a sense of camaraderie among the troupe and achieved an informality that was engaging. It capitalized on its mistakes during the age of live video, "sharing the fun with the televiewers," wrote a critic.

When that TV series was canceled more than two years later, on May 25, 1956, Lewis consoled himself by picking up where he had left off in radio. *The Robert Q. Lewis Show* continued from 1956-58 weeknights at 8 p.m. over CBS with some carryovers from the daytime TV series. Vocalists Richard Hayes (who persevered as the last of the Little Godfreys, appearing on the Old Redhead's final broadcast in 1972) and Judy Johnson along with Ray Bloch's Orchestra turned up. Lewis also corralled Ralph Bell, Kenny Delmar, Parker Fennelly, Johnny Gibson, Pert Kelton, Ann

Thomas and other entertainers during this period for the evening series and a 55-minute Saturday comedy-variety show at 11:05 a.m. over CBS Radio.

"On TV, there is such a thing as being too long in one spot," he told a *TV Radio Mirror* interviewer in 1958. "The best thing that happened to me was to be off TV for two seasons and give people a chance to rediscover me on radio. I must say I enjoyed rediscovering radio myself, after being away about six years. The tremendous resurgence of interest in it is very exciting."

Lewis said radio appealed to him because "I can do anything I want to on the show without worrying about production costs, time, schedules, and anything like that. There are no sets, no costuming. Listeners 'dress us up' as they feel we should be costumed when we play certain parts. They set the stage with their imaginations. I can do sketches about anything, set in any locale, and people will believe in them."

He also was enamored with the freedom and flexibility of radio, including its shorter hours. "What a luxury to sit up late, finishing a book I can't bear to put down, knowing I can sleep a little late in the morning," he averred. "I used to get to rehearsals practically at the crack of dawn." Lewis had earlier told another scribe he liked to stay up until midnight and sleep until 8:30 a.m. Television, of course, changed all that.

He earned numerous awards for his contributions to the mediums in which he performed. In May 1955 the readers of *TV Radio Mirror* magazine voted the shows he hosted as both their "Favorite TV Daytime Comedy" and "Favorite Radio Daytime Comedy." Three years hence the same periodical's subscribers elected him their "Favorite Radio Comedian" and host of their "Favorite Radio Evening Variety Program." The same issue asserted that he had acquired eight such honors by then deter-



Robert Q. Lewis and bandleader Ray Bloch

mined by the fanzine's readers.

Lewis would continue making occasional appearances as a surrogate master of ceremonies on several televised game shows. Most notably he subbed for Bud Collyer on Goodson-Todman's *To Tell the Truth* from 1963-65. But after the late 1960s his days as a frequent television entertainer were over. "My relaxed, easygoing format just went out of vogue," he told *TV Guide*.

Lewis prided himself, as has been noted, on his ability to help protégés and aspiring artists. At 33 he announced that he expected to retire at 45. "I've seen too many performers keep going too long, outliving their legends – destroying them," he commented. But what he really was communicating then was his intention to shift into another aspect of show business at that time (in 1966).

"I plan to become an agent or manager," he allowed. "There's so much talent around – so many fine performers – and they don't know what to do with themselves. I hope to catch them before they

arrive, then work with them. And when they finally do arrive, that's when they really need help. They don't know what to do with their money. They don't know how to live.

"I'd handle only one or two personalities a year," he declared. "That way, I could really concentrate on them. And then I'd like to start producing stage shows. They'd be musical reviews, using only fresh new talent – giving young performers a chance to show what they can do."

Eventually, he mused, he would like to open his own theater in New York, where he could stage his own shows, and feature talent he had discovered and molded. It seemed like a dream a little boy might have, one perhaps who sat beside his father at a Saturday matinee, discovering a magic world that was bigger than life.

While he may have been instrumental in guiding some neophytes, there is no record that Lewis's ambition to own his own theater – or to manage young talent – ever occurred. Eventually the humorist, like so many of his compatriots in entertainment, left the confines of the Big Apple, seeking new fortunes on the West Coast. By then network radio, for most intents and purposes, had ended. There Lewis found yet another disk jockey slot and returned to spinning records, taking him back to his broadcast origins.

The funny man with the droll wit and the impish gleam died on December 11, 1991 at age 70. He had brought a charismatic charm to millions of listeners and viewers in the fading stage of one medium and the embryonic stage of another. While his brand of humor may "never really [have] caught on" (one pundit's opinion) with the majority of American amusement-seekers, as a second banana Lewis seemed to possess few rivals. In every way he was the quintessential substitute host.

And in that regard, he possibly had no equals. ■