Hitch Your Antenna to the Stars

Early Television and Broadcast Stardom

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about the role that the notion of authenticity played in both the ability of a star to successfully pitch product as well as its centrality to postwar television's delineation of stardom in general. Chapter 6 focuses on a new paradigm for television stardom that developed in the early to mid 1950s. With the larger context of shifting relationships among sponsors, networks, and independent producers as a backdrop, I discuss the ramifications of the sitcom format and the rise of telefilm on the construction of television stardom, although acknowledging the continuing, albeit altered, presence of the vaudeo style in this process.

This book represents the first major history of early television stardom. Although there are quite a number of well-written star biographies available that reveal the experiences, memories, and opinions of certain individual stars and some great academic histories of the early television industry, there is still no concrete, commonly understood understanding of the initial industrial conceptualization of television stardom and its subsequent permutations. The dearth of information on and analysis of this subject is certainly *not* because stars are an impalpable presence in primary documentation and accounts of postwar broadcasting. On the contrary, stars make up the majority of popular press coverage of television during this period. In addition, the trade press is replete with articles on the long-awaited star system; the careers of individual stars; the role of stars in the networks' processes of standardization and differentiation; and the conflicts surrounding the unionization of television performers. Indeed, it is downright odd that television historians have not yet fully utilized these materials and followed the example of their counterparts in cinema studies who have traced the use and implications of the film industry's star system or those who have used specific stars as case studies for cultural or industrial analyses of discrete historical periods. With the publication of this book, I hope to stimulate more research in this area, as I could only cover a single decade of television's production of image and celebrity. I would like to see others pick up where I left off and explore how the various industrial and commercial relationships, performance styles, personas, and business strategies that helped shape the star system in the postwar era were altered, discarded, or adapted to the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s.

CHAPTER 1
RADIO AND THE SALIENCY OF A BROADCAST STAR SYSTEM

One cannot fully understand the workings of early television without first understanding network radio. This is true not only because they were part of the same industry, were technologically linked, and had almost identical patterns of funding and ownership, but also because early television borrowed many of radio's cultural signifiers and narrative strategies. In many instances, entire programs, genres, and scheduling techniques were simply lifted from radio and reworked to fit the aesthetic qualities of television. As such, by the 1950 season, many popular variety shows and sitcoms were being simulcast on both mediums during prime time; by mid-decade, soap operas had begun to migrate to television as well.[1] It was commonly thought that such familiar programming would help ease the audience's transition from one broadcasting medium to another. As is the case with most presold products, it was also believed that adapting successful radio shows for television would lower the financial risk because brand new television shows were expensive to produce and carried with them no guarantees of success. Highly popular radio stars were thought to ease this transition as well; audiences would surely be eager to finally *watch* the performers they had spent so many years listening to. However, even as sponsors and networks enjoyed the predictability of presold products, there were concerns that radio

programming had already gone stale, and that once the novelty of television wore off viewers would tire of already familiar programs and stars. Many in the industry believed that television would eventually have no choice but to produce unique genres and new faces. As *Variety* reported in March 1948, "With constant criticism raised against radio for its failure to develop new stars or new programming formats there's no question about it being in a static condition. Top network and ad agency personnel, consequently, are hopefully eyeing tele as the prescription that can remedy the situation."[2]

Obviously, television performance and its accompanying star system did not occur in a vacuum. They developed in direct relationship to radio and, to a lesser extent, to film, nightclubs, and theater. Television narratives, performance, and its production of celebrity in some ways had to make up for a perceived lack in radio, while simultaneously maintaining many of its traditions and borrowing on its successes. The industrial and economic structures that supported radio during its Golden Age carried over to television, affecting not only the manner in which stars were utilized, packaged, and sold but also what types of stars would emerge out of and flourish in this environment. For example, as we will see in succeeding chapters, vaudeo star came about logically because of the industry's desire to differentiate itself aesthetically from other mediums, while still balancing the financial interests and needs of the networks, sponsors, advertising agencies, and audiences, most of whom were all familiar and comfortable with what they had experienced in radio. Radio set the terms for the conception of the medium of television as well as furnishing the framework for the development of broadcasting's star system. This chapter will explore the ways that the broadcast industry prefigured the characteristics of the ideal television performer through its generation of radio talent, the interlocking economic relationships it established in its earlier years, and the particular manner in which it negotiated the coupling of entertainment and commercial narratives. In order to unearth the complex relationships that existed among radio, television, film, and stage, we need to turn to the 1920s, a period in which radio went from being a highly localized hobby for amateurs to a form of mass entertainment engaged with national narratives and shifting notions of consumerism and what it meant to be American.

Indirect Advertising and Radio Talent in the 1920s

During the decade following the end of World War I, the United States underwent massive social change. As most are aware, this was the time of

prohibition, flappers, modernism, and the Jazz Age. Yet, it was also a time when the liberal values of urban life were coming into conflict with those of rural protestants; when nativists organized in response to pluralism and increasing ethnic heterogeneity; when a simultaneous suspicion of and expansion of federal power existed; and when mass production, urbanization, and popular culture were on the rise. American culture was also becoming more and more of a consumer culture as the growth of advertising and mass media industries coincided with an increase in leisure time and disposable income. According to the social historian Lynn Dumenil, both the working and middle classes "found in the consumer culture an antidote to the loss of power in the modern world, to the problem of hierarchy, routinization, and standardization."[3]

For broadcasting, the 1920s was the period in which it became a centralized, regulated, national industry and a primary producer of cultural texts. By 1927 NBC had two networks on the air (NBC-Red, NBC-Blue) and CBS had just made its national debut. Although radio was well on its way to becoming a popular domestic middle-class entertainment medium by the early to mid-1920s, it did not produce much innovative programming. At first it was primarily unknown singers, commentators, and announcers who filled the airwaves, because, as an avenue for primarily music and information, radio made only small and occasional forays into the production of narrative.[4] Programs featuring orchestras such as the A&P Gypsies and the Ipana Troubadours were the most popular shows on the air for a time.[5] Comedy programs, which would eventually prove to be broadcasting's forte, were not a staple of network radio until the 1930s. In the 1920s, local stations began to hire the occasional low-budget comic for "song and patter" programs but, for the most part, big-name comedians stayed away from the new medium.[6] In his 1979 book, *Radio Comedy*, Frank Wertheim argues that vaudeville and nightclub performers initially were reluctant to perform on radio because they found performing with a microphone without an audience alienating; they weren't willing to accept the low pay that broadcasters were offering; and vaudeville booking agents were reluctant to allow their players to perform in an entertainment medium that was competing with their own.[7] This would all change as broadcasting proved itself to be a true competitor in the world of entertainment and as vaudeville began to die off in the early 1930s. In the meantime, mostly announcers, musical groups, and other types of amateur performers put in their time on local stations. Along the way, many of them became known not by their own names but by the names of sponsors.

The practice of indirect advertising, which involved connecting a sponsor or product name with the program title or performers, was common during the early years of broadcasting primarily because of the debates that had occurred around the regulation and commercialization of the broadcast industry. In a series of conferences occurring from 1922 to 1925 the Department of Commerce (led by Herbert H. Hoover) took on the question of just how radio would be funded and regulated. There was little doubt that they would come down in favor of an open market rather than pure governmental support and operation. Yet there were concerns expressed both in the conferences as well as by the general public regarding the effect that product advertising and private ownership would have on the types of programming produced. In an effort to create a brake of sorts for rampant commercialism and decisions influenced primarily by the bottom line, the legislative proposal that resulted from the conferences included calls for broadcasting to serve the public good. (It should be noted that it was also used to rationalize the support of a few large corporations in their broadcasting endeavors.[8]) The policies that resulted would require this private industry to be held somewhat accountable for its duty to serve the "public interest"—a troublingly vague term that could be used to either protect or justify a range of policies and actions. As Thomas Streeter has pointed out, even broadcast advertising itself was "justified on the grounds that it served the needs of the system, and thus the public interest."[9] Nevertheless, broadcasters were aware of listeners' distaste for brash commercialism and were concerned about being too overt in their commercial objectives, so indirect advertising provided a comfortable middle ground for a time wherein the sponsor's name would be heard but without a hard sell or direct pitch. Edgar H. Felix, whose book *Using Radio in Sales Promotion* was published in 1927, reminded his readers that:

> The method used to direct attention to the sponsor through which the goodwill gained is capitalized by him is the most delicate phase of program preparation. In this respect more than in any other must the attitude of the listener be kept scrupulously in mind. The most successful are those in which the name of the feature itself is indelibly tied in with the name of the product. Eveready Hour, the Happiness Boys, the Gold Dust Twins, Clicquot Club Eskimos, for example, are household words in the areas which are served by their programs. [10]

The Happiness Boys were in fact one of the first acts to appear regularly on the broadcast schedule under their sponsor's name. The Happiness

Candy Company first aired their "song and humor" program featuring the duo Billy Jones and Ernie Hare on WEAF in New York in 1923. The pair had worked in vaudeville and recording prior to being hired for radio. On radio, however, their own names were subordinated to the larger aims of the sponsor.[11] The success of this team seemed to prove the effectiveness of indirect advertising as a negotiative tactic, because as long as Happiness Candy avoided direct advertising, the popularity of their show and the visibility of their product increased. Felix, who was writing during the peak years of indirect advertising, noted, "The 'Happiness Boys' are radio's outstanding humorists, and their following is as loyal as that of any movie star or baseball idol."[12] By late 1928, the Happiness Boys had become the Interwoven Pair for the Interwoven Sock Company. Later, they would become the Taystee Loafers for Taystee, and in 1932 they performed as the Best Food Boys for Best Foods. Although some listeners knew that the Happiness Boys/the Interwoven Pair were actually Jones and Hare, most performers on the radio in the 1920s were anonymous. The only name associated with their performance/persona was the sponsor's. Most of these people were new to the entertainment industry, as established performers from vaudeville, theater, or film would not allow their personas to be completely overtaken by a corporation. Established people had gone by their stage names and, understandably, wanted to continue to capitalize on those names. Although this allowed sponsors to advertise in a commercially sensitive environment, this situation further discouraged the entry of established talent.

As arguments over radio's commercialization began to die down in the late 1920s and as larger corporations began investing more money into radio advertising, the nature of radio talent and formats underwent considerable alteration. An early sign of this was the move toward hiring name talent. One way that agencies provided a strong distinguishing element to their programs, and thereby potentially guaranteed large audiences, was to employ presold, top-name talent from other entertainment media. An advertising executive and writer for *Chase and Sanborn*, Carroll Carroll recalled that, "the real gut power of radio surfaced around 1931 when advertisers began to abandon such obvious broadcast nomenclature as the A&P Gypsies, Paul Oliver and Olive Palmer in the *Palmolive Hour*, the Gold Dust Twins, the Happiness Boys (later the Interwoven Pair—a sock act), the Clicquot Club Eskimos and [replace them] with the use of star talent."[13] There was also a move toward the production of fictionalized narratives, such as serials, anthology dramas, musical programs, and

Fig. 1.1 The Happiness Boys (Billy Jones and Ernie Hare). Library of American Broadcasting.

variety shows, which as Michele Hilmes points out, came out of broadcasters' need to have regular and reliable output of product.[14]

Many radio historians consider The Fleischmann's Yeast Hour with Rudy Vallee to be the first program to signal the medium's transition to variety programs and pre-sold talent and single out Vallee as radio's first real star. Premiering in 1929 and running for almost ten years, The Fleischmann's Yeast Hour had Vallee at its center, around which high-profile guest stars such as Eddie Cantor and Burns and Allen would appear in

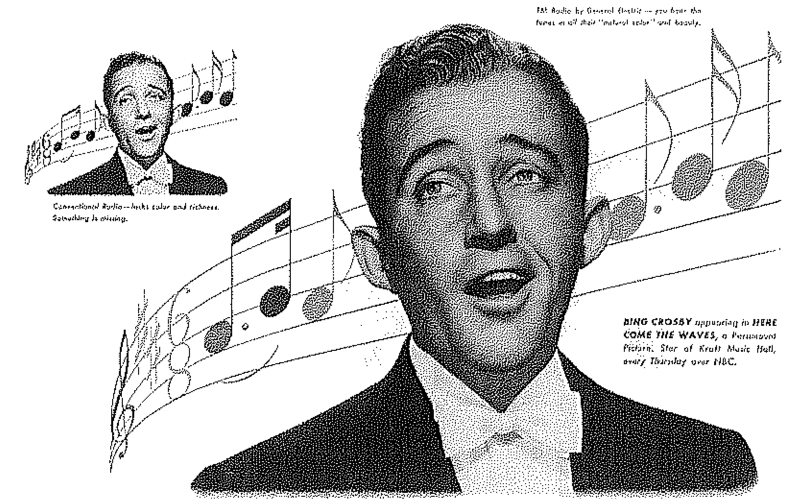
Fig. 1.2 Rudy Vallee. Library of American Broadcasting.

comic sketches. Vallee had established his persona on Broadway and in night clubs where he was a popular and attractive band singer.[15] At this point, advertising agencies still used the sponsor's name in the title of their programs but allowed their hosts and regular talent to retain their prior names and images. These precedents anticipated radio's move toward the poaching and recasting of talent from entertainment media, as many Broadway performers tested out the medium through guest spots on these early variety programs.

Vallee was a crooner, which was a popular form of romantic, electronically amplified singing done by a young male band singer with a microphone.

Fig. 1.3 Bing Crosby. Library of American Broadcasting.

From 1929 through the mid-1930s, crooners such as Vallee, Bing Crosby, and Russ Columbo were the most listened to, and at times the most controversial, singers on the air. In her study of Vallee, Allison McCracken remarks that crooning "was remarkable for its homogenizing synthesis of American music, as it combined the intense romanticism of the Victorian ballad with the amorality of the urban novelty song and the emotionalism and sensuality of jazz music."[16] She also notes that within this musical and performative combination existed an amorphous sexuality that, although attractive to many women, led the press to deride singers such as Vallee and Crosby for being both playboys and oddly effeminate. The crooner's female fans were enraptured by the intensely romantic style as well as the seeming nearness of the singer's presence. McCracken argues that this



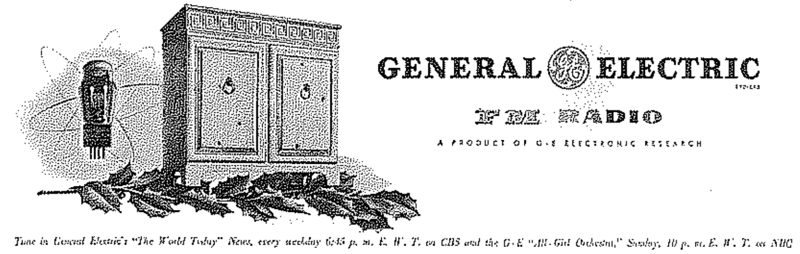


Fig. 1.4 Bing Crosby hawks GE radios. Interestingly, the ad promotes programs on two networks with references to NBC's *Kraft Music Hall* (of which Crosby was the star) and two GE sponsored programs on CBS, *The World Today* and *All-Girl Orchestra*.

had everything to do with the crooner's use of electronic technology, as the combination of an amplified microphone and radio broadcasting offered an intense type of intimacy that couldn't be found elsewhere—even on stage. Timothy D. Taylor agrees with McCracken and

adds that the crooners were constructing an intimacy not with their audience in general, but with one (female) listener, adding that, "crooning as a singing style thus introduced a paradox: whereas radio was proclaimed as uniting disparate Americans into a single national culture, this singing style that had been ushered into existence by radio helped create and maintain an illusion that listener's relationships to singers and other broadcasting individuals were unmediated, personal."[17] Radio's placement in the domestic coupled with its liveness creates a sense of intimate oneness between listener and performer just as it can recreate a sense of place within a crowd, such as a packed theater. This interplay between individual and community experience is essential to the relationship between listener and broadcasting star. Rudy Vallee was the first to fully exploit it.

In 1929, NBC acquired the talents of two performers who would participate in the first national radio phenomenon. Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll appeared on NBC Blue on August 29, 1929, in their program *Amos 'n' Andy,* which was picked up by the network because of the local success of their WGN Chicago show, *Sam 'n' Henry*. Based on vaudeville traditions such as minstrel and "rube" acts, Gosden and Correll's program was preoccupied with racial dialect and cultural incompetence in its representation of African Americans through aural blackface.[18] In part because of its serial narrative, sitcom structure, and mobilization of 1920s racial discourse, the program was so wildly popular that some have gone so far as to credit the program with causing radio's rapid diffusion in the early 1930s. In the case of *Amos'n Andy,* however, it was not the name nor the personas of Gosden and Correll that captured the nation's imagination; rather, it was the personalities of the characters they played. It wasn't until the introduction of ex-vaudevillians to radio that a performer's stage name became essential to the development and marketing of programs.

The exploitation of vaudeville headliners and sound comedy film stars would be a primary factor in the standardization and differentiation that was established during radio's classical period. In the 1956 *Broadcasting in America,* Sydney W. Head claimed that two of the major accomplishments of 1930s broadcasting were the adaptation of entertainment formats (from vaudeville, theater, and film) to the radio medium and radio's development of star talent. Head writes:

> Radio discovered in the 1930s, as cinema had discovered years before, that successful syndicated programming on a national scale depends in large measure on certain intangible assets by star performers. These assets justify paying the star salaries...The control of talent was from the first an important factor in successful network operations, for which reason both NBC and CBS operated their own talent agencies until the practice was condemned by the FCC. In the strategy of network competition the ability of a network to command a lineup of top stars remains as important as its ability to muster a lineup of top stations as affiliates.[19]

With a focus on top-name talent, networks could provide affiliates with something that they couldn't afford on their own and sponsors with someone whom audiences would associate with their product. The emphasis on such performers would contribute to the rise of the radio comedian and no greater investment in the variety format. Although the acquisition of individuals such as Cantor, Edgar Bergen, and Fred Allen would raise production costs to previously unforeseen heights, it would also help make the network broadcasting a national pastime and mark the beginning of the broadcast industry's reliance on vaudeville-inflected comedy in prime-time programming, a practice that would continue into television.

Ex-Vaudevillians in Radio Variety Programs: The Success of Eddie Cantor

Presold talent was not all that radio would borrow from Broadway and Hollywood. The format of the traditional vaudeville bill, with its olio structure and patchwork presentation of various musical, comedy, and acrobatic acts, was well suited to the characteristics of the medium as well as to the relationship that the sponsor desired with its audience/consumers. The variety format was highly pliable in that if a particular type of sketch or guest act bombed, producers could replace the segment the following week. If audiences were especially responsive to a specific performer, character, or sketch, a sponsor could make that a regular feature of the program. Moreover, vaudeville was a felicitous stage style for radio to ape in that broadcasting's dependence on local outlets resembles the very structure of a vaudeville circuit.

Up until the 1920s, networks were still producing almost half of what audiences heard on the air.[20] However, by as early as the 1930s, ad agencies had almost completely taken over the production of national sponsored programming.[21] During radio's heyday, the agencies developed programs in-house for sponsors and then purchased air time from networks or local stations. Although the agencies maintained a level of creative control, the sponsor held the purse strings and could therefore nix material, talent, or formats. This lack of network control affected the aims

of programming narratives as well as the manner in which the audience was perceived. Agencies were required not only to establish an appropriate environment for commercial messages but also to create a program that could appeal to an audience large enough to satisfy the sponsors' need for a consumer base. Sponsored shows that did not rack up audience numbers were useless in this environment, and the resulting urgency in which agencies needed to track audience size augmented the use of radio rating services. Moreover, the program itself became a product, as agencies launched major merchandising campaigns complete with print ads, trade paper notices, displays, billboards, and broadsides.[22] The sponsors had access to larger and broader demographic numbers because of network domination of local stations. In order for a station to be successful in the 1930s, it needed to be affiliated with one of the four national networks —NBC-Blue, NBC-Red, CBS, and Mutual. In 1935, 14 percent of all radio stations in the United States were affiliated with one of the NBC networks, and NBC owned ten of their own stations.[23] Approximately 15 percent of stations were affiliated with CBS, and that network owned nine stations outright.[24] Mutual and other regional networks had agreements with local low-power outlets that attracted only small audiences, so sponsors with large advertising budgets put their money with either CBS or NBC, producing national programs with broad appeal.

Throughout radio's golden age (roughly 1934–1941), the most popular prime-time formats were the anthology (or prestige) drama and the variety show. Largely because of the revolving casts of shows such as *The Lux Radio Theatre*, *Mercury Theater of the Air*, and *The Screen Guild Theatre*, few significant original personalities arose from the anthology shows. Very few regular figures or characters occurred, limiting identification and advertising promotions.[25] (Orson Welles was a notable exception.) Consequently, singers and radio comedians hosting the variety programs were the ones who were constructed as the stars of the airwaves. The variety show maintained one pivotal personality—or host—who would link together a series of sketches, musical numbers, acts, and/or monologues. Usually the host was aided by at least one subsidiary character. For example, Charlie McCarthy and Mortimer Snerd accompanied Edgar Bergen; Rochester was always alongside Jack Benny; Jerry Colonna supported Bob Hope, and Fred Allen had his real-life wife, Portland Hoffa.

Cantor was one of the first Broadway comedians to make it big in radio. As host of the *Chase and Sanborn Hour*—which premiered on NBC on September 13, 1931, and was produced by one of the largest broadcast

Fig. 1.5 Eddie Cantor. Library of American Broadcasting.

ad agencies, J. Walter Thompson—Cantor performed many of his signature routines. But he also altered his style to suit the needs of a commercial broadcasting program. He discovered that instead of depending solely on gags, the broadcast audience remembered and responded better to characters (the Mad Russian and Parkyakarkas) and multiepisode themes (such as his Cantor-for-President campaign).[26] He used his

announcer, who would often insert commercial references into the program, as his straight man. Even with all these alterations to his stage technique, Cantor, who was one of the most popular vaudeville and Ziegfeld Follies headliners of the 1920s, would occasionally neglect to take into consideration radio's wholly aural environment as he continued to perform sight gags and costume jokes on the air, which were funny to the studio audience but left the listening audience completely baffled.[27] Overall, Cantor handled the transition to radio quite well and would serve as a model for future radio comedians, yet figuring out exactly how a persona was signified in radio remained a bit perplexing. Writing about the psychology of radio in 1935, Hadley Cantil and Gordon Allport discuss the difficulty of fashioning a definitive personality for the radio performer: "The [talkie] is designed to give the personality of the actor the fullest display. The star of the talkie is seen and is heard, and in a close-up can almost be tasted. But the radio star is present only to the ear, and his personal qualities and appearance must be left in part to the imagination."[28]

Constructing or transforming a persona to fit radio was a crucial element in radio stardom. The ad agency could then utilize these personas in various ways. J. Walter Thompson executives knew from previous experience that celebrity endorsements could produce great profits. (Michael Mashon points out that Thompson had used this strategy since the success of its "Nine Out of Ten Stars Prefer Lux Soap" print campaign of the early 1920s.[29]) Therefore, J. Walter Thompson was more likely to develop shows that contained highly visible performers at their center.[30] That way the agency could link the star's persona to the sponsor's product within the program text as well as outside of it. By the 1930s, it was fairly common practice to incorporate commercial messages into the program's narrative. However, Mashon's research on J. Walter Thompson's radio department shows how important and yet still financially risky it was for one of the most active ad agencies in broadcasting to develop a show around one or two performers:

> The Thompson programs depended on proven star power to generate audiences, which was at once a conservative and radical approach; conservative in the sense that the agency was relying on pre-sold commodities . . . and risky in that these stars demanded enormous salaries at a time when most agencies were moving into radio with some trepidation and modest financial resources.[31]

The high cost of talent became a central issue for sponsors at the very time that Eddie Cantor began his run on radio (and would rise again during the early 1950s for television sponsors). Because advertising had taken over radio production, in 1932 the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers (ASCAP) and the talent agencies decided to stop allowing their members and clients to perform without pay. During the period of early growth and dissemination of the medium in the 1920s, they had considered free performances simply good publicity for actors, musicians, comics, and announcers. But as performers and their representatives started to see commercial sponsors profiting off their live and recorded performances, they demanded fair remuneration.[32] Indeed, as Cantor's popularity increased, so did his salary. A 1941 article revealed the extreme disparity of salaries in the broadcasting industry by comparing Cantor's salary to others. It claimed that a page boy earned $18 a week, an executive made $1,000 a week and Cantor pulled in a whopping $10,000 for eighteen minutes on the air.[33] Even with the high cost, Cantor was a sound investment for Standard Brands, since at the time of entry into radio he had already proven his star power in two other media. Cantor was one of the most successful comedians on Broadway in the 1920s. *Whoopee*, a Ziegfeld production with Cantor in the lead role, was the top grossing musical during the 1928–1929 season.[34] Cantor's films *Kid Boots* (Famous Players, 1926) and *Whoopee* (United Artists, 1930), although not as widely successful as his Ziegfeld performances, drew in significant box office numbers. The persona that Standard Brands was buying through its investment in Cantor's fame, however, was one that would primarily appeal to a New York audience. Henry Jenkins notes that after years of performing for Ziegfeld, Cantor had become closely identified with the sensibility of New York City:

> Cantor enjoyed the freedom of a more "sophisticated" following; his comedy was sprinkled with cynical remarks about marriage and with eye-rolling double entendres that even hardened local critics sometimes found "too blue" for their tastes. Moreover, Cantor relied heavily on his Jewishness as an appeal to the city's ethnically diverse theatrical audience.[35]

The context for Cantor's urban, Jewish sensibility grew out of what Albert McLean calls vaudeville's "new humor"—a style that came into practice at the turn of the century along with what Douglas Gilbert calls "Jewish character comedy." The "aggressive" and "excited" wordplay of the new humor resulted in part from interaction with vaudeville's new

immigrant audience. McLean writes that "by 1900 both characters and situations had become stereotyped and standardized to the point where the only novelty lay in the fluid, living language of the cities—in dialect, in boners, in slang, and other surprises of sound and syntax."[36] Often the source of the style's characterizations and verbal play was the stereotyped image of the Jewish immigrant. Although the verbal play of this type of humor would suit the purely aural nature of the broadcasting medium, much of the content would have to change. As Susan Smulyan notes, "Performers coming to radio from vaudeville . . . lacked experience with the restrictions imposed on home entertainment—experience earlier radio performers had already gained in the recording industry."[37] Consequently, the blue humor and ethnic references that characterized Cantor's Broadway style—although appealing to much of the urban radio audience —would need to be sanitized and homogenized by producers and network censors for *Chase and Sanborn*'s national NBC audience. Nevertheless, radio comedy would retain some elements of its vaudeville origins, including, in Cantor's case, ethnic humor.[38] These experiences with radio censorship would also eventually have significant influence in decisions television producers would make in their mediation of vaudeo content and fashioning of personality.

Although he began his career in radio as a gag comedian, by 1934 Cantor was openly criticizing the formula that he had perfected on Broadway and in his first few years on radio. At one point, he told an interviewer that he'd "like to get away from gags altogether . . . the public is sick of them. We rewrite old jokes, dress 'em up, and call 'em new gags. But you can't fool the public."[39] Critics were tiring of the slapstick and gag routines as well. In 1935, A. M. Sullivan remarked, "For the past seven years radio broadcasting has been operated on the vaudeville formula, and even the ex-booking agents of 10–20–30 cent circuits recognize that the pattern is getting threadbare."[40] The concern over the content that vaudevillians brought to radio from the stage continued to plague the format throughout the 1930s and was often tied to the criticisms of gag comedy.

Although criticism of the gag and variety format existed, the popularity of *Chase and Sanborn* led to a proliferation of shows of a similar ilk. In 1932, shows featuring Fred Allen, George Jessel, Jack Benny, Ed Wynn, and Burns and Allen, premiered on prime-time network radio. Broadcasters recognized the saliency of the hosts' personas and found that their high visibility sustained a show's top ratings. In exchange, radio provided ex-vaudevillians with the opportunity to achieve a fame that reached far

Fig. 1.6 A display of Eddie Cantor merchandise and publicity material. Library of American Broadcasting.

beyond that which they had known before. Yet the sponsors and networks would often end up in battles over content and behavior with their stars. In particular, network executives were on the lookout (particularly during World War II) for transgressive political behaviors and opinions. Cantor, who was very outspoken about his religious and moral beliefs during his off-air time, was often chided for his actions, even as his charity work was applauded by the press. One of Cantor's scrapbooks revealed that he had donated his time to the Red Cross, the Army and Navy Relief Fund, Hadassah, and the Children Refugee funds as well as various old-age homes, Catholic charities, and orphanages.[41] He also was an active Zionist.[42] A Young and Rubicam memo stated the reasons they thought that Cantor's popularity had dropped off in those years. The memo is revealing in that it outlines the agency's belief that comedy is incongruous with intellectual or social causes:

> (1.) in [his last radio show] if he didn't flop, he didn't ring the bell. (2.) His last picture was a flop. (3.) His appearance at the Capitol Theatre was a flop. (4.) His non-comedy activities have tended to present him

> as a serious minded person, making it difficult to appreciate him as a person to be laughed at. (5.) His attack on Father Coughlin was ill-advised. (6.) The manhandling of two studio guests left an ugly impression. (7.) His charge that radio editors lack honesty of purpose received unfavorable attention.[43]

Despite his declining popularity in the late 1930s, Cantor set the tone for radio variety programming. His early success was convincing evidence of the compelling nature of the radio vaudeville persona. Once some of the brash or outlandish aspects of vaudeville performance were quieted, the form would fairly consistently please audiences, critics, and sponsors. Still, the very debates and issues surrounding the emergence of radio comics such as Cantor would be recapitulated years later in television, showing the difficulty, and perhaps futility, of completely sanitizing this generic form in broadcasting.

Hollywood, Radio, Stardom

The relationship between broadcasting and Hollywood has been a complicated one from the very beginning, as it has been riddled with both ambivalence and hopeful expectation. There was much potential for cross-promotion but also for much competition. However, much of what would occur during the 1930s among the entertainment industries would not only establish long-standing financial relationships but also would lay the groundwork for the way in which broadcast stardom (both radio and television) would be culturally and industrially imagined in relation to film stardom.

Hollywood has been a talent poacher in much the same way that radio and television have. In fact, after finding many of its stars in vaudeville, nightclubs, and legitimate theater, studios tried to make film stars out of popular radio performers. In his comprehensive history of 1930s Hollywood, Tino Balio argues that there were two ways radio stars were used in the movies during that time: (1) they were cast as the central character and the film was written as a star vehicle for them; or (2) a backstage musical narrative was used as a way to showcase a number of radio performers doing their regular routine.[44] The first strategy only really worked for one radio star—Bing Crosby. The second strategy was more successful generally and resulted in a number of fairly popular films, most notably those of Paramount's Big Broadcast series (*The Big Broadcast*, *The Big Broadcast of 1936*, *The Big Broadcast of 1937*, *The Big Broadcast of 1938*) which starred such luminaries as Crosby, Hope, Benny, Burns and Allen, Kate Smith, and Cab Calloway as themselves in films set in the radio industry.[45] Overall, however, radio stars did not do that well on film and producers had a hard time explaining exactly why. It seemed as though film stars had an easier time adapting their performance conventions to the narrative world of radio (particularly when it came to radio adaptations of Hollywood films) than the other way around. As a writer for *Variety* stated in a review of one radio team's recent picture, "a whole list of radio folks who went to Hollywood, made one picture, and apart from a piece of change, did themselves little good."[46]

The same year that vaudevillians took over the airwaves, 1932, marked a turning point in the attitudes of film studios with regard to the potentialities of radio promotion. Instead of seeing radio as simply a competitor, studio publicity departments began to regard radio a lucrative and creative venue for their marketing campaigns. Some studios such as RKO-Radio (which was owned by RCA) and MGM even began sponsoring their own radio programs during that year. Most studios, including RKO and MGM, focused their efforts on promoting new releases through backstage gossip shows or movie adaptations.[47] Although stars were not charging studios for their appearances on such shows, some in the industry noted that there might be other long-term costs to exploiting film stardom in the domestic medium of broadcasting. Exhibitors had long been upset by the studios' lenient attitude toward these appearances and, in fact, enacted a boycott of radio in 1934. Although, as Hilmes proves, the length and strength of the Radio Ban of 1934 has been generally exaggerated by historians, it did force studios to at least give voice to the negative, yet still quiescent, effects of this type of exploitation of stars. In addition, it allowed studios to exert more control over the appearances of contract talent.[48] A complicated relationship developed among studios, exhibitors, and broadcasting during the 1930s as studios increased their direct and indirect investments into radio and a significant number of exhibitors actually espoused the advantages of radio as a publicity tool for Hollywood. Another interesting by-product of this struggle over the appearances of contract talent was the revelation of the industry's working assumptions about the nature of film stardom and how broadcasting might impinge on it.

The ex-vaudevillians appearing on radio during these years were willing to be employed by advertising agencies and to engage in the process of on-air selling. At least at first, legitimate stage and Hollywood film stars were far less malleable in this regard. Screen stars either did not wish to be

"tainted" by the brash commercialism of sponsored programming or were already beholden to the wishes of a studio. Sometimes they would appear on radio variety shows as guest stars or participate in dramatic programs or movie adaptations to promote studio product. Studios and exhibitors were greatly invested in their stars' images and were therefore quite protective of them. The exhibitors feared that film stars' repeated exposure on radio would keep filmgoers at home as well as lead to a depletion of their box-office appeal. Specifically, they were angry that stars were giving "free" performances during prime movie-going hours. Studios, however, were less worried about radio's deleterious impact on the elusive nature of film stardom and more interested in regulating star radio appearances to their own advantage.[49]

The ontology of the movie star as delineated by the industrial discourse of the 1934 radio ban hinges on the idea that a star's presence or image is a limited commodity. An image can be "spent" through an appearance in a film, publicity junket, or radio broadcast. Although an outside observer might think that any amount of publicity would be good for a star's box office appeal, the industry believed otherwise. It would seem that, in order to get spectators in the theater to see a specific star, that star should have had restricted circulation in media environments. Interestingly, articles in fan magazines may not have been a part of this equation since they were constructed in a manner simultaneously to reveal and conceal information about the star in order to pique a fan's interest.[50] As Cathy Klaprat has discussed in her work on the film star as market strategy, each industrial tier—production, distribution, exhibition—had individual but interlocking uses for the star image.[51] Producers used stars in order to differentiate product and to create a house style for the studio, whereas distributors based rental prices on the known drawing power of a specific star, and exhibitors used stars to attract audiences to their theaters.[51] Overexploitation of the star image could cause a decrease in his or her rarity value and, therefore, potentially threaten the system of standardization and differentiation engaged across the three tiers.

Exhibitors were especially reluctant about the appearance of film stars on radio. The fact that a star would "expend" only the aural aspects of his/her image through the medium makes the exhibitors' anxiety about radio in particular a bit curious. Yet because exhibitors considered broadcasting to be a direct competitor with film, their wariness of the new medium in general may explain a large part of their concern. Aligning radio appearances with the depletion of star rarity value was a clever rhetorical strategy

for the exhibitors in their struggle with studios, as depletion could potentially have had reverberations throughout the entire industry. So, by using it as the premise for the ban, the interpenetration between broadcasting and Hollywood could have been successfully questioned.

But what does this struggle tell us about broadcasting's perceived impact on the circulation of star images? To begin with, it speaks to the way in which studio-era Hollywood distanced itself rhetorically from the machinations of mass production and commercialism via its comparisons with the broadcasting industry. Even though Hollywood obviously maintained the economic form and structure of an industry engaged in mass production, it was successful in creating an image of artistic endeavor. This is not to say that one could consider Hollywood output as high culture rather than popular, or mass entertainment. Rather, it is to point out how Hollywood was able to place itself above what was popularly considered the "crass" commercialism of broadcasting. The production of narrative by advertising agencies, the ubiquitous presence of the sponsor's product on the air, and the massive, immediate output of the medium left the broadcasting industry vulnerable to such accusations. Even though broadcasters were successful in their campaign for commercialism in the 1920s (primarily through allusions to national unity through networks), they were never able to completely squelch the often accusatory rhetoric (on its purported social, cultural, and psychological effects) circulating around the uneasy alliance between advertising and entertainment. In the Golden Age, this critique took the form of campaigns for educational programming and "quality" and cultural uplift in, at least, network sustaining programming. According to the rhetoric deployed in the Radio Ban, the Hollywood star also was defenseless against the effects of radio's commercialism. Stars could be tainted, reduced, or possibly destroyed by their engagement with the medium.[52]

The discourse surrounding commercialism and film stars versus radio stars reasserted a hierarchical relationship between these forms of stardom. It asserted the preeminence of film in the production of "high-quality" stardom and placed broadcast stardom in a secondary position. This not only affected the broadcast industry's ability to attract Hollywood talent to the medium but also set up the assumption (still at work in star theory today) that television stars were not as culturally worthy or potent as their filmic counterparts. Yet the very feature that defines their so-called inferior status—their overt commercialism—was the thing that made their images so culturally prolific and influential.

An Audio "Star-System": Star Branding, Continuity, and Cross-promotion

J. Fred MacDonald points out that, "[w]hile the great movie studios at this time were using contracts and business agreements to create the so-called 'star system' of motion-picture celebrities, in radio it was the advertising agencies that were developing an audio star system."[53] Consequently, radio's star system (and, later, television's) had different contours from that of screen or stage. The most glaring difference was the decentralized nature of radio's system and the way in which it had to manage the various commercial and program texts in which a potential star would appear. Most important, the advertisers and networks had to create continuity in their stars' personas in order to ensure uniformity between the star and the product brand. The lessons that agencies and networks learned here would have a major impact in how they envisioned and eventually packaged postwar television stars.

Unlike the studio-era film star who was required to represent a particular studio and its products, the radio star was committed to represent the sponsor, the network, and, to a lesser extent, the advertising agency who employed him or her. A high-profile radio performer would sign a contract with the network and the advertising agency, releasing the use of his or her image for advertising purposes. Thereafter, the performer would often engage in cross-promotion, appearing in print ads, radio spots, and billboards peddling consumer products, the program, the network the program aired on, and sometimes even the network's radio sets as was the case with NBC. If another company wanted to hire a radio star for an ad campaign, contracts required the hiring firm to carry the name of the show's sponsor, network, and its time slot. Additionally, consumers might have found their favorite radio star in a film at their local movie theater. This venue provided a broadcast performer broader exposure and a certain level of prestige that would benefit the performer, network, and sponsor. Although it was assumed that too much radio exposure could cost a film star some of his or her box-office draw, it was generally believed that success on film would *add* to a radio comedian's profile with audiences.

What is especially intriguing in relation to the project of selling the star who began in radio is that the initial textual image is constructed in a purely aural medium. Thus, the secondary circulation of image (in print ads, films, etc.) is essential to the potency of the initial one. The visual construction needs to coincide with the star's on-air image yet also provide some essential information to fill out the audience's imagination of who

Gracie bulbsnatches while George Burns!

G·E LAMPS Stay Brighter Longer!

GENERAL ELECTRIC

Fig. 1.7 George Burns and Gracie Allen promote their radio program as they sell GE lightbulbs.

this particular radio performer/character is. One would have to be exceedingly conscious of the maintenance of image continuity especially if the star was involved with cross promotion. In order to achieve continuity both within the text and outside of it, an agency would first attempt to maintain continuity in the form and content of the program. Felix describes the role that textual continuity played in the hiring of talent:

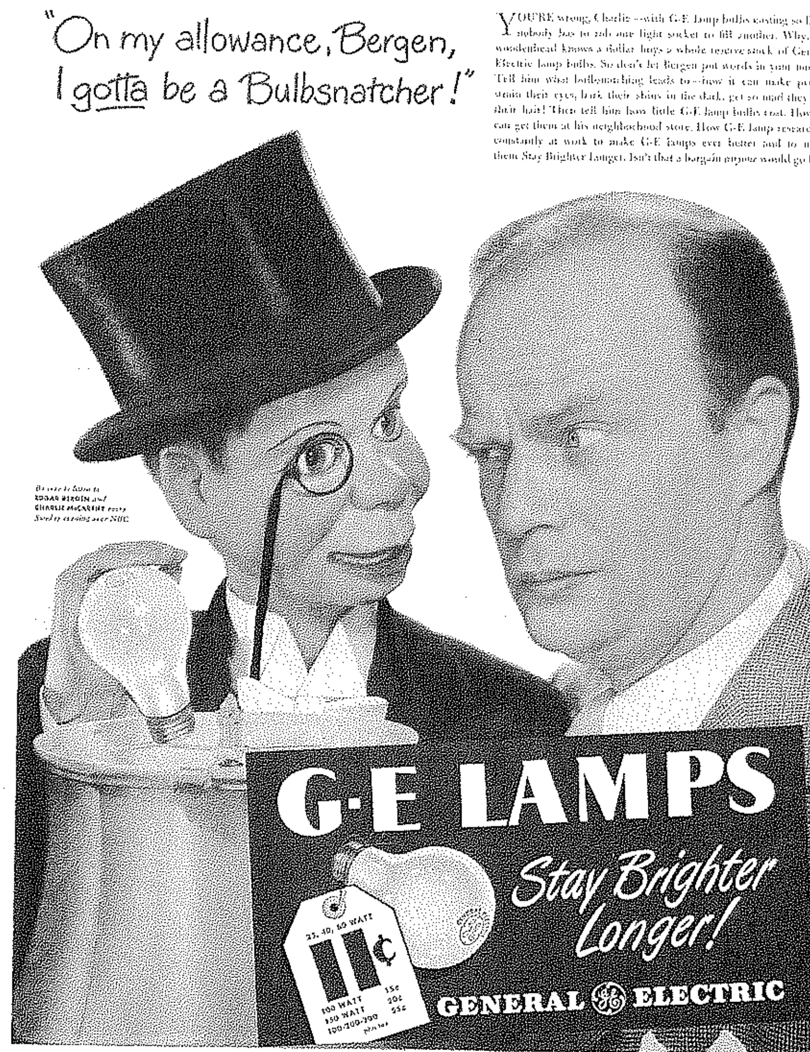


Fig. 1.8 Charlie McCarthy and Edgar Bergen for GE.

> Continuity or sustaining power is in a sense the direct opposite of attention-compelling power. Having won attention for a feature, the next thing which must be accomplished is to make all those who hear it regular listeners. This is accomplished by the pursuance of a definite program policy, employing the same sustaining artists. Guest artists may augment the permanent group, but it is of great importance that the principal artists be retained regularly.[54]

So, although continuity within the program was important to keeping a regular audience of listeners, in order for the ad agency to conjoin the "sustaining artist" with the sponsor, continuity within a star's textual and extratextual performances was also a priority. Beyond continuity with the program, the star's persona had to be consistent across varied media. For this to be achieved, the character that the comedian played on his or her radio program had to at least partially resemble his or her "real-life" personality. For example, Benny maintained recognizably consistent characteristics on the air, in the publicity on his personal life, in his films, and in print and broadcast ads. On a very basic level, in the case of most Golden Age radio stars, the program's title and main character all bore the stage name of the performer. This was because sponsors recognized that the name of a vaudeville headliner was the primary hook in the effort to attract audiences and to differentiate the program from the old-style orchestral shows. Because the star's name (and persona by implication) was the most recognizable and therefore exploitable name associated with the program, it was the program's brand name. Moreover, for example, Benny had to remain "Jack" across media in order to preserve a continuity of image. The sponsor's goal in this process was to make their product's name either synonymous, or at least easily associated, with that of the performer's name.[55] As a result, the nature of a performer's character and performance style had to be constructed in a manner that coincided with the product's image. Felix vigorously warned sponsors that:

> If dependence is placed upon a personality, such as impresario or announcer, to establish continuity and sponsor consciousness, extraordinary care must be used in selecting the individual for this role. Any voice failing, such as foreign accent, whining or nasal quality, affectedness or effeminateness, must be positively avoided.[56]

A factor complicating the project of continuity was the radio star's perceived authenticity in regard to his or her off- and on-air lives. Although cinema-star studies have established the intuitive and analytical abilities of fans to understand the deliberate fashioning of star images by the industry, it is also thought that much of a fan's pleasure in engaging with extratextual materials comes out of his or her search for the authentic persona behind the construction.[57] By the time the variety and sitcom formats had been set in radio's Golden Age, the formula for a successful negotiation of a radio performer's "real" life versus on-air life was also established. Many of the radio comedians during this period not only used

their stage name as their radio character's name but also employed certain aspects of their personal lives for use in their sketches and monologues. Benny, Allen, and Burns all played off their relationships with their real-life wives in their programs. Mary Livingstone was initially only the name of the character that Benny's wife, Sadie Marks Benny, played on the program, but she adopted it as her legal and professional name once the show became a national phenomenon. In addition, the rest of Benny's supporting cast (except for Eddie Anderson, who played Rochester) performed under their own names. Benny's negotiation of direct showmanship and fictional characterization is an important point in the development of commercial and narrative continuity. Benny played basically himself in a backstage and at-home narrative based on an approximation of life in show business. Because of this backstage structure (akin to that of 1930s musicals), Benny could engage directly with his audience, introduce musical acts, sketches, and monologues, and yet remain within the framework of a situation comedy. This enabled his star image to be at the center of the program while still reaping the narrative benefits of the sitcom and variety formats. Continuity for sponsor identification was preserved through the cross-media retention of Benny's persona.

Star branding also promoted continuity between program and commercial texts. Much of the trade press during the late 1920s through the 1930s was focused on the best way to manage the medium's "flow." Scheduling and programming became vital issues during this period as did the negotiation of commercial messages within a program's narrative trajectory. In an address to the National Association of Broadcasters in 1929, Batten, Barton, Durstine, & Osborne (BBDO) partner Roy Durstine lambasted broadcasting programmers for ignoring the connection between the commercial and editorial spots of a program. Mashon writes that "what Durstine had recognized quite early in the game was that successful broadcast advertising depended on flow, a continuity not only between the show and its commercials, but between programs as well."[58]

Although the host was most often placed as the locus of the incorporation of the sponsor's name or product, sometimes, as was the case with Don Wilson in the Jack Benny program, an announcer would act as the primary integrator of the sponsor's message. In this role, performers such as Wilson were required to insert nonchalantly into the program lines such as "I shopped around until I found half a dozen neckties, each one corresponding in color to a different flavor of Jell-O. . . . You know, Strawberry, Raspberry, Cherry, Orange, Lemon and Lime."[59] Yet even while Wilson was pushing the sponsor's name whenever possible, Benny's image became synonymous with a number of the products. In particular, the names Jack Benny and Jell-O (which sponsored the show from 1934 to 1942) became entwined in the minds of the radio audience. Not only would Benny make references to his sponsor's product—as in his frequent opening line, "Jell-O again. This is Jack Benny"—but Benny was required by his contract with the sponsor to allow his image to be used in ads outside the confines of the program's time slot. This also was true of the majority of the successful radio comics. (Bob Hope, for example, would start his show by quipping, "This is Bob 'Pepsodent' Hope.") In successfully making this connection, an advertising agency could unite the merchandising of the program with the project of selling product; retain the connections among network, star, and product throughout an entire campaign; and naturalize the incorporation of references to the sponsor's product with the program's narrative structure. The blending of commercial and program narratives provided a justification for the sponsor's production of the entire program and located the star as the center of both narrative trajectories. In selling this advertising strategy to agencies, NBC, according to Hilmes, "argued that this 'interweaving' technique gave the advertising message added force and credibility and avoided the potential 'offense' in more direct selling messages: listeners would scarcely be aware they were being sold."[60]

Maintaining continuity of the star's image mattered not only to the performer and the product sponsor but also to the network. The manner in which networks could utilize star performers is similar to the way studios used film stars to promote a certain "house style." For example, NBC clearly believed that Benny's image was integral to their creation of a specific network image. By the early 1940s, NBC had given Benny the time slot of Sunday nights at seven, no matter who was sponsoring his program. Although the sponsor owned the time, that time slot on NBC had become so associated with Benny that the network saw it in its own best interests to make Benny this unprecedented promise. NBC's reliance on stars was clear by this time as they maintained the largest stable of names in the business, including Bergen, Godsen and Correll, Red Skelton, and Burns and Allen. NBC controlled the circulation of the star's image as best they could in order to stifle competition; for example, NBC attempted to restrict guest performances of its stars on the other networks. Moreover, the voracity of CBS's talent raid in 1948 also speaks to the perceived importance of the links between particular stars and their networks.

Fig. 1.9 NBC asks its audience to "Imagine Bob Hope on Television" in 1944.

The Saliency of Broadcast Stardom

CBS's move to lure NBC's most important performers over to CBS was preceded by a decade of shifting relations among performers, talent agents, sponsors, and the networks. NBC and CBS, believing they could garner some control and financial benefit from representing performers

(and eventually writers and directors), had established their own artist bureaus in the 1930s. However, under pressure from the government by 1941, both networks had sold these divisions. The Federal Communications Commission's *Report on Chain Broadcasting (1938–41)* that focused on NBC found that:

> As agent for artists, NBC is under a fiduciary duty to procure the best terms possible for the artists. NBC's dual role necessarily prevents arm's length bargaining and constitutes a serious conflict of interest. Moreover, this dual capacity gives NBC an unfair advantage over independent artists' representatives who do not themselves control employment opportunities or have direct access to the radio audience.[61]

Soon after the report came out, the CBS Artist Bureau was sold to MCA whereas the NBC Artist Bureau became a new agency, National Concerts and Artists. MCA went on to become the most powerful talent agency in motion pictures and broadcasting, representing performers, directors, commentators, and writers. Because of the government's intervention, creative talent would have representation that would look out for their interests instead of those of the network and sponsors. A direct consequence of this would be a rise in salaries and fees as well as a slow swelling of star power within the hierarchical structure of broadcasting.

Why did this occur? Part of the answer lies in the significant cultural and social influence that top name talent were accruing. One of the most striking examples of the radio stars' power was the way in which they were used for the war effort in the early 1940s. During World War II, the Office of War Information (OWI) enlisted radio performers to aid in the war effort. Hope, Bing Crosby, and Benny were extremely active in the entertainment of troops stationed in Africa, Italy, Iran, and the South Pacific. Others such as Burns and Allen, who performed on a War Bond Campaign show, a Navy Enlistment broadcast, and a China Relief Program, appeared as guests on special war-related radio programs.[62] The most common practice, though, was the inclusion of war-related material in the text of a comedy program or of spot announcements at the show's conclusion. During the war years, writers added an additional layer to the technique of interweaving commercial and program narratives as they introduced government messages on patriotism, rationing, and the draft into the texts. And, once again, stars eased the transition from entertainment to directive. Crafting the war messages at the OWI's Domestic Radio Bureau, former advertising executive Donald Stauffer headed up

the group. Stauffer even claimed that stars helped to dress up their war messages "in six delicious flavors."[63] Radio stars' participation in the war effort had a return effect: it endowed them with increased potency as national symbols, as the OWI constructed them as essential tools in the propagation of nationalistic ideals and wartime conservation. In some cases, they were seen as so valuable to the war effort that they were recognized by the government as comedic heroes.[64]

By the mid-1940s, many top radio comedians were grossing as much as $25,000 a week but were still not satisfied with their take-home income or their treatment by their network (in particular, NBC). Benny and Cantor, whose shows had spawned stars and spin-offs that profited the network, were aware of their popularity with audiences and began to use that power as a bargaining point. NBC, however, made the initial mistake of underestimating their stars' intrinsic role in the construction of its schedule and network identity. In 1946 contract renewal negotiations, Crosby requested that he tape-record his Kraft radio series so that he could edit out mistakes and broadcast his best singing performances. NBC refused, fearing that recorded programs would lead to the demise of live network broadcasting. The network also claimed, because it was required to use only RCA equipment and RCA had not developed a viable recording machine as of yet, that it also was technically unable to meet such a demand. ABC, however, was willing and able to use an APEX recording system and lured Crosby, and eventually other performers, over to the network with the promise of taped programming.

During the 1947–1948 season, other NBC stars demanded that their shows be recorded. Many of them felt that recording their programs would afford them more control not only over their performance but also over their lives and schedules. They were also aware that recordings could permit rebroadcasts and, consequently, additional revenue. In a December 1948 letter to NBC executive Sidney Strotz, Ozzie Nelson wrote, "I hate to keep after you like this but don't you think NBC is foolish to hasten the demise of radio by putting unnecessary restrictions on performance? . . . With the other major networks allowing tape recording, NBC is putting an unfair burden on people like us who are trying to do a good job for you as well as ourselves."[65]

CBS President William Paley recognized this moment as an opportunity to woo radio names to CBS and openly advertised the network's willingness to prerecord comedy programs. By January 1948, NBC had no choice but to capitulate. Yet, as a *Variety* article on the subject pointed

Fig. 1.10 ABC proclaims "Funny Business is our Business" in this 1947 ad. Although CBS and NBC were clearly beating the network in this regard, they had recently acquired Bing Crosby due to CBS's refusal to let him tape record his program.

out, other stars were actually against the move to recorded programs. The article reported that Benny "says he'll stay live regardless; that he's being paid for a topical show and doesn't think it fair (either to the sponsor or to the listener) to record a show three or four weeks in advance. As far as Benny is concerned, it's bad showmanship and he maintains that

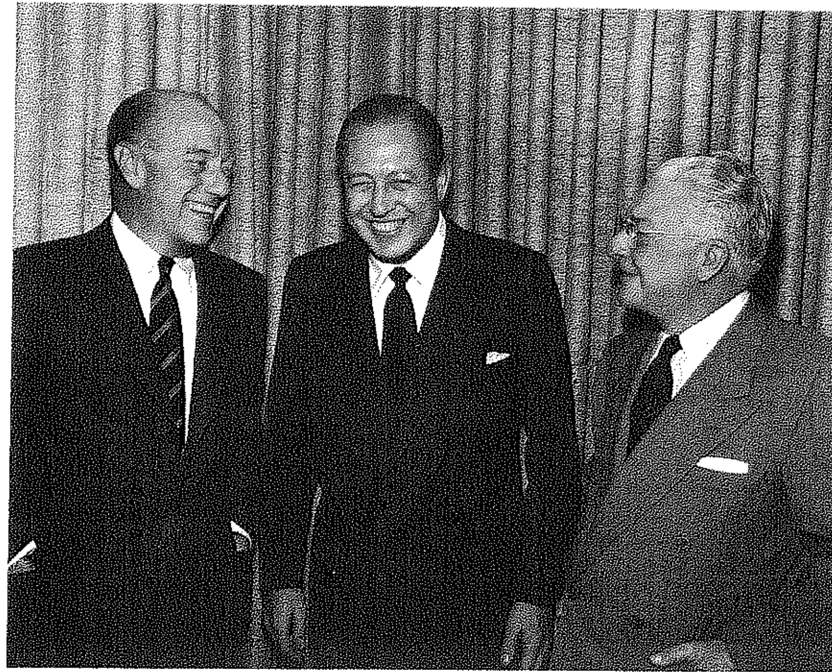


Fig. 1.11 William Paley (center) with Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll. Library of American Broadcasting.

inevitably it must hurt the stars."[66] If Benny wasn't interested in moving to a network that would record his shows, salary advantages were important to him. During the 1946–1947 season, after paying his cast and team of writers, Benny was averaging $2,000 per episode for his Sunday night program.[67] Yet he was not happy with his salary and had, in August 1947, lost out on a major contract dispute with his sponsor American Tobacco. In the past, Benny had received a yearly $250,000 "exploitation-promotion-publicity fund" managed by his hand-picked publicist, Steve Hannagan, during the star's years with Jell-O and in the first years with American Tobacco–Lucky Strike.[68] Because of a turnover in management, the network refused to continue this promotion package. NBC continued to publicize his program, as did Foote, Cone & Belding, who produced the American Tobacco program. Moreover, Benny had already set up a production company of his own—Amusement Enterprises, which handled radio packages (including Jack Paar), legitimate theater, and films. CBS had never developed a strong talent lineup in radio and had eyed NBC's roster of names with envy for many years. By 1947, the network was aware that stars such as Benny, as well as Gosden, Correll, and

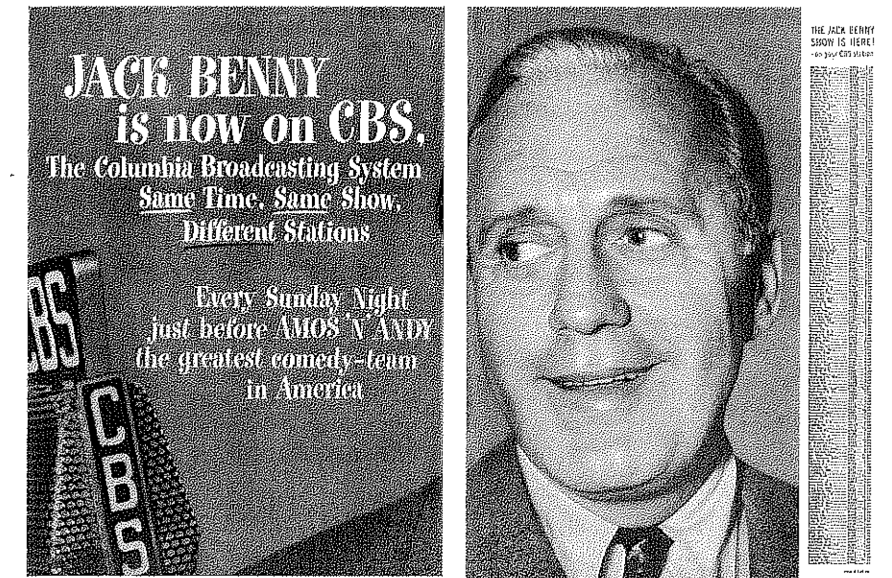


Fig. 1.12 CBS announces that "Jack Benny is Now on CBS" in this 1947 ad.

Bergen, were dissatisfied with their take-home salaries. Because of new income tax rates established after the war, an individual earning over $70,000 a year was required to give the U.S. Treasury department ninety-one cents of every dollar he/she earned. [69] This left most successful radio stars with rather dismal paychecks. With the help of MCA President Lew Wasserman, CBS developed a strategy to overcome the tax burden. They realized that shows such as *The Jack Benny Program* could be considered properties which, when sold, would benefit from the low capital-gains rate. The stars of the programs would be considered the properties' major assets. Although this had been common practice for business corporations and a practice in the film industry for several years, it had never been tried in any broadcasting arena. If it worked here, CBS would retain a level of control over content and scheduling, and the program's star would more than quadruple his or her net income, as CBS, on purchasing a program, also would provide stars with regular salaries for their performances.

CBS first purchased *Amos 'n' Andy* in September of that year and by December Benny had sold his program (for $2,260,000) to the network as well.[70] This was a major coup for the network as Benny (along with Hope) was considered the most popular comedian of radio's era. When CBS first approached Benny with the capital gains idea, he had gone to NBC executives to see if they would buy Amusement Enterprises from him, but

NBC Advertisement

We're on NBC

by Fibber McGee

Well sir . . . I and Molly are starting our fifteenth year on NBC this season. If all the chimes that have been rung on our program were jingled together, we'd sell an awful lot of good humor, which is what we're here for anyway. Them NBC chimes have always stood for the best entertainment you could get through a loudspeaker.

I was saying to Molly just the other day: "Kiddo," I said, "what this country needs is more entertainment." "Entertainment?" she says, coming back at me quicker than a yoyo on a six-inch string. "Yep, entertainment." I says, "The average American has more worries than a boa constrictor in a revolving door. He needs to get his mind off his troubles." "You're a little late, Dearie," says Molly, "NBC has already thought of it. Look at this list of wonderful shows." By George, she's right. NBC has a lineup of shows this season that are newer than a set of Tinkertoys on Christmas Eve, and brighter than a Quiz Kid under a sunlamp.

If you cock a quick gander at the next four pages, you'll get an idea of the good listening coming up this fall on NBC. Including me and Molly and a fellow named Bob Hope on Tuesday night . . . we ain't new, but we're comfortable.

Fig. 1.13 In 1948, NBC shows that Paley hasn't taken away all its talent with this five page ad.

NBC refused, not foreseeing the significance of what would be known as the "CBS Talent Raid of 1948." As Benny and MCA began to negotiate seriously with CBS, NBC came up with a counteroffer, but it was too late; Benny was insulted by the way that NBC had treated him in their early discussions of the matter. RCA Chairman David Sarnoff had little interest in negotiating with talent, in part, because he worried that these types of capital gains transactions would not go over well with the IRS, but he was also dubious about a broadcast star system, fearing it would give talent too much power.[71] Meanwhile, William Paley personally courted Benny.

Fig. 1.13 **Continued.**

He was acutely aware of the fact that a strong star lineup could lead his network safely into the television age. *Variety* noted this in a November 1948 editorial on the capital gains deal:

> [T]hese selfsame execs are in the process of ladling out unprecedented coin for personalities; a chunk of coin, in the case of Jack Benny, perhaps undreamed of in any sphere of show business. Obviously, the primary consideration isn't in protecting a hold on Benny as a strictly radio property—but in looking to his inevitable segue into television in the era

NBC Advertisement cont.

Fig. 1.13 **Continued.**

of coast-to-coast TV programming, when radio, it's recognized, will be but a secondary offshoot of video.[72]

By the end of 1948, CBS had also procured Bergen, Skelton, and Burns and Allen.[73] The loss of these programs and personnel was highly detrimental to NBC, yet Sarnoff remained steadfast in his position against offering his stars capital gains deals. An NBC executive remarked to Sarnoff's biographer that he believed that Sarnoff's resistance to making such offers was because of personal feelings of betrayal, "[Sarnoff]

NBC Advertisement cont.

Fig. 1.13 **Continued.**

resented the attitude of the performers whom, after all, we had helped build up into stars. He felt, I think, that they were being 'disloyal.' . . . Some of us thought of talent as a marketable commodity. . . . In the final analysis we have had to accept the star system and live with it anyhow."[74]

During the late 1940s, the significance of the broadcasting star was at once buoyed and challenged by the coming of television. Most top comedians announced their industrial and cultural importance in order to secure their place (and their authority) in the unknown terrain of a visual broadcast medium. Yet with cultural and industrial recognition of their

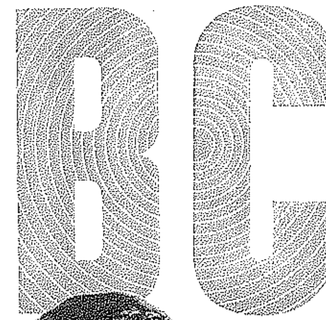


Fig. 1.13 **Continued.**

centrality to the national network system came added responsibilities and burdens. Their ideological reach and influence would make them ready targets for the public red-baiting of the Cold War era. For example, by 1950, a significant number of the individuals who made up broadcasting's top-tier talent would be under investigation by the anticommunist organization Counter-Attack. Moreover, the transition to television

would be a stressful one for most radio comics. For some, it would mean the end of their careers as the requirements of television production were taxing and deviated too much from the style of radio performance. For others, television would allow them to remain on the air for the least another decade.