

“Command Performance” (Episode No. 21)—Bob Hope, Master of Ceremonies (July 7, 1942)

Added to the National Registry: 2005

Essay by Cary O'Dell



Bob Hope



Soldiers line up for a “Command Performance” performance

Radio’s unique “Command Performance” series was the brainchild of producer Louis G. Cowan. Cowan had joined the radio division of the US War Department just prior to the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor. With the commencement of the war though, Cowan found his job suddenly changed: rather than producing shows for civilians, he now found himself charged with creating programs for thousands of new servicemen stationed all around the globe.

So he happened upon an idea. Many new members of the armed forces were no doubt having to quickly and awkwardly adjust to their new regimented military existence, to the myriad of commands and orders they now had to obey. What would happen if, instead of taking commands, they were allowed to give them, at least in terms of entertainment?

Similar in nature to TV’s later “You Asked For It!,” Cowan’s “Command Performance” would solicit requests from servicemen the world over and ask them what they wanted to hear over the air. Cowan and his radio staff would then do their best to make it happen for them.

From the beginning, to show their support for the troops, performers of all types (recruited via letters and ads in “Variety”) were generous with their time and talents. And both CBS and NBC donated their studios and recording facilities to the production. Even the major unions and show business guilds relaxed their rules in order to do these shows for the war effort (with the caveat that the shows be heard only by military personnel).

Originally done in New York (the program moved to Hollywood in its second year to have greater access to talent), “Command’s” first episode occurred on March 1, 1942 with Eddie Cantor acting as MC. Recorded in front of a live audience, it was sent via shortwave transmission to troops overseas. (Installments were also recorded onto 16” lacquer-coated discs, the pre-audio tape recording medium of the day, and then pressed onto vinyl transcription discs for eventual shipping overseas.)

Each subsequent weekly installment had a different host and different line-up of guests depending on requests. Though often it was a song or a comedy skit that soldiers wanted to hear, sometimes requests (commands!) were a little more esoteric. One serviceman asked to hear movie glamour girl Carole Landis sigh over the air. Others asked for things even more personal. One soldier wanted to hear the sound of his dog he had left at home in Indiana; one wanted to hear the foghorns of San Francisco; one wanted to hear the sounds of a nickel slot machine

paying off a jackpot. Whatever it was, Cowan and his fellow producers Vic Knight and Maury Holland dispatched teams with recorders to capture them.

Over the course of the series, a virtual who's who of film, theater and radio artists appeared on the program. Among them: Dinah Shore, Edgar Bergen, Mary Martin, Kate Smith, George Jessel, Abbott and Costello, Betty Grable, Loretta Young, Cary Grant, Bing Crosby, Tallulah Bankhead, Jeanette MacDonald, Martha Raye, Betty Hutton, Katherine Hepburn, Ginger Rogers, Ethel Waters, Spike Jones, Kay Kyser, Danny Kaye, Tex Ritter, Bette Davis, Shirley Temple, Ida Lupino, Judy Canova, Jack Benny, and more.

One of the series' most famous episodes occurred on February 5, 1945. It was an all-star send-up of "Dick Tracy" titled "Dick Tracy in B-Flat; or, For Goodness Sake, Isn't He Ever Going to Marry Tess Trueheart?" It featured Bing Crosby as Tracy and Dinah Shore as Tess with Jerry Colonna, Bob Hope, Jimmy Durante, Judy Garland, Frank Sinatra and Cass Daley voicing supporting roles.

Also well-remembered was "Command's" 1942 Christmas show, a program aired, via approval from the networks and unions, nationally to civilians for the first time. It featured the Andrews Sisters, Red Skelton, Harriet Hilliard (i.e. Harriet Nelson), Bing Crosby, Ethel Waters, and Spike Jones.

The installment that was added to the Library of Congress's National Registry in 2005 aired originally on July 7, 1942. The broadcast begins with revelry before announcer Paul Douglas breaks in to introduce the program: "Presented this week and every week til it's over, over there." After a few bars of the WWI anthem "Over There" (used by special permission of George M. Cohan), Douglas returns and brings out the evening's MC.

This show, show No. 21, featured Bob Hope, already known for his devotion to America's service men and women, making his debut as "Command Performance's" host. Also in the line-up that night was songstress Lena Horne, "the singing sensation of MGM," as she was called, who was requested by some troops in the West Indies; she performed "Just One of Those Things." From some soldiers "somewhere in South America" the comedy duo of Shaw & Lee were requested; they do a skit followed by Les Brown and His Orchestra doing a souped up version of the "Anvil Chorus." A group of 10 men in the Panama Canal Zone had also written in for singer Ginny Simms who then appears in order to do a lovely rendition of "Until I Live Again." Finally, seven soldiers somewhere in the Pacific wrote in to hear their favorite actress, Rosalind Russell. She takes part in a short sketch, a comedic sequel of sorts to "It Happened One Night" titled "It Didn't." Hope is her co-star.

It's a jam-packed 30 minutes, warmly received by the live audience. All of the performers are in fine form. Hope seems especially vibrant, perhaps happy that certain standards and practices he usually had to observe did not apply to this broadcast sent overseas and mainly to an audience of young males. At the time, Hope was shooting the harem-based "Road to Morocco" and he makes a joke about a eunuch that no radio network at the time would probably have allowed. (He also makes a not so subtle double entendre about Kate Smith and her "Moon Over the Mountain.")

After the music and gaiety, and many spoken potshots at our wartime enemies, Hitler and the Japanese, Hope closes the show by wishing all its listeners safety and a quick trip home. He also appeals for more written requests, stating "while some high school letters are worn on sweaters, your letters are next to our hearts."

"Command Performance" would endure long after the end of the war, becoming a staple of Armed Forces Radio. Its last broadcast was in 1949. Till the end it continued to bring to "the

boys” overseas a wide cross selection of top tier talent, and a little bit of home. In the process, it also expanded, or at least amplified, radio’s role—one that stretched beyond the airing of popular songs and the reciting of sports scores and, instead, played a vital part in the morale and well-being of those at the very frontlines of war.

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