

“The Fred Allen Show” (October 7, 1945)

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Essay by Norman H. Finkelstein (guest post)*



Fred Allen

Voices out of a box. That’s what people at home listened to for entertainment in the first half of the 20th century before the advent of television. Sounds, without images, required a leap of imagination. Particularly in the Depression Era and World War II, listeners were comforted by access to the latest news and a wide variety of entertainment. But the comedy programs most cheered them on through the news of the day. They looked forward to the weekly programs of George Burns and Gracie Allen, Eddie Cantor, Fred Allen, Jack Benny and others. Each offering a different take on comedy.

The radio comedians shared common experiences on their road to success. With childhoods of poverty, often children of immigrants, many left school by the eighth grade and after years of honing their craft, they found their niche as vaudevillians in the decades before radio. Vaudeville was a tough business. Those who were not quick on their feet, clever and tenacious, quickly fell by the wayside. With vaudeville beginning to die by the mid-1920s, the best among them reinvented themselves by transferring their talents to the new mass medium of radio.

Fred Allen did not start out as a comedian. Born in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1894 as John Florence Sullivan, into a poor Irish family, he attended Boston’s Commerce High School where salesmanship and public speaking were emphasized. Working after school at the Boston Public Library gave him access to the world of books including one volume on juggling that caught his attention. He taught himself to juggle and went onto the vaudeville stage as “The World’s Worst Juggler.” To take the focus off his mediocre juggling skills while playing across the country on vaudeville circuits, he captivated audiences with the quick sardonically comic adlibs, which were to become his trademark.

In 1922, Allen turned to Broadway and performed in several productions. In one show, he met a chorus girl, Portland Hoffa, who later became his wife and performance partner on stage and on radio. In 1932, Allen began his radio career, first as the host of “The Linit Bath Club Review” which, over time, morphed into shows with other names (often referencing a new commercial sponsor) resulting, finally, in 1935, with the hour-long “Town Hall Tonight.” The program consisted of segments including wry observations of current events and the Mighty Allen Art Players who satirized popular culture. In the years that followed, the show changed networks, sponsors, time-slots and cast members but Allen’s wry style and quick ad libs remained. After 1936, two unique Allen-inspired features differentiated his program from others.

First was the manufactured “feud” with Jack Benny. On the December 30, 1936, program featuring a ten year-old virtuoso violinist, Allen complimented the boy for being a better player than “a certain alleged violin player,” not so subtly referring to Jack Benny. Benny, an accomplished violinist in his own right, nevertheless developed the persona of a vain and out-of-tune violinist in his own program. The result was a decades long fake feud between the two comedians, each appearing on the other’s programs to fuel the attention. Unlike other radio comedians of his time, Allen wrote much of the program scripts by himself leading into one on-air confrontation with Benny. When Allen said, “Jack, you couldn’t ad-lib a belch after a plate of Hungarian goulash,” Benny responded, “You wouldn’t say that if my writers were here.” The second popular program feature was “Allen’s Alley,” which found Allen strolling along and stopping at four doors to ask each stereotyped “resident” a topical question.

“The Fred Allen Show,” a remaking of his previous radio shows, on Sunday evening, October 7, 1945, marked Allen’s return to radio after a year-long hiatus due to illness. It was largely representative of his earlier programs, but with a few differences. It was on a new network, NBC, with new sponsors, Tender Leaf Tea and Blue Bonnett Margarine. It introduced the singing DeMarco Sisters who began the program with a sing-song, “Mr. Allen, Mr. Aaaaalennn!” To which Allen responded in his typical manner mentioning the name of a prominent person, this time with “It isn’t Gabriel Heatter, kiddies!”

The program began with Allen mentioning this was his first time on the air in a year. Reviving the Benny “feud,” he asked announcer Kenny Delmar, “Is that old gentleman [Jack Benny] still on the air?” This was followed by the entrance of Portland Hoffa, who in her high-pitched voice, proceeded to ask what the question of the day will be as they head toward Allen’s Alley. With World War II just over, housing was a national concern and Allen’s question was “How is the housing shortage affecting you?”

They first came to the door of a new character, Senator Claghorn, invented and portrayed by announcer Kenny Delmar. His door is answered by the bombastic and overbearing senator who asks in a deeply Southern accent, “Somebody, I say somebody knocked. Who was it? Senator Claghorn’s the name. Claghorn that is.”

Their next stop was the door of a crusty New England farmer with a distinctive Maine accent, Titus Moody, played by Parker Fennelly. “Howdy Bub. Titus Moody by name. Moody by nature.” To answer Allen’s question, Moody responds, “I ordered one of them two room houses from Sears Roebuck. Sears was living in the front room, Roebuck was living in the back.”

The third stop was at the home of Pansy Nussbaum, portrayed by Minerva Pious, who spoke mangled English with a heavy Yiddish accent. Answering her door with the Yiddish expression, “Nu?” Allen greeted her with “Oh, Mrs. Nussbaum.” Pansy replied, “Were expecting maybe Emperor Shapirohito?” She then responded to Allen’s question by describing the panoply of relatives with distinguishable Jewish names living in all parts of her house. Today, many would consider such stereotypical representation offensive but it was a different time back then and no offense was generally taken.

The final stop was at the home of two new characters in the show, songwriters McGee and McGee, played by Kenny Delmar and Irving Kaufman, who responded to Allen in unison.

During the program there was music by the DeMarco Sisters and Al Gordon and his orchestra. The main skit of the evening featured Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy. Bergen was a popular radio ventriloquist; Charlie, his wooden mannequin. The improbable story line was the premise that Allen owed his return to radio by teaming up with Charlie.

“The Fred Allen Show” ended in 1949, just as television began to replace radio. His program style, wit (and even his face) did not carry over well into the new medium although he made frequent guest appearances on other programs. Fred Allen died in 1956.

Norman H. Finkelstein is the author of over 20 nonfiction books including “Sounds In the Air: The Golden Age of Radio” and “The Way Things Never Were: The Truth About ‘The Good Old Days.’”

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.
