



# RADIO REVIEW

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LUELLA S. LAUDIN, EDITOR

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## *Heart Throbs and Coffee*

About two years ago, people living in New York City and its environs began to hear many favorable comments about a program presented by a local station. The master of ceremonies, who was the main attraction, skillfully brought out the personality of each performer and kept his own within pleasantly modest bounds. This successful feature was the original amateur hour, and the man who made it the talk of New York was Major Bowes.

The radio industry, ever imitative, was quick to pick up the idea and experiment with it. Amateur hours cropped up on local stations all over the country, and lest foreigners be deprived of the unique pleasures of this novelty, were even presented in other languages. The ultimate has probably been achieved, now that we have several juvenile editions on the air. To date we can report no amateur animal performers but this may be in the offing.

However, it was not until one of radio's heaviest advertisers brought Major Bowes to the networks that the country at large had an opportunity to discover what latent talent lies in washerwomen, fruit store salesmen and others in prosaic occupations. An amazing number of gifted grocery clerks, all

specializing, by a strange coincidence, in one particular brand of coffee, have been brought to light. In addition to hearing amateurs on the radio, fans may now see them in a few vaudeville theatres scattered over the country. Only opera remains uninvaded as yet, but any day now we may expect to hear that Major Bowes has persuaded Mr. Johnson to introduce amateur opera companies into the Metropolitan.

Our grievance with amateur hours is not based on the fact that they are making a few men wealthy at the expense of ambitious young people and unemployed professionals who perform at "amateur" rates. (The *New York Post* under dates of October 15, 16, 17 and 18 printed some illuminating comments in connection with this situation.) We are not particularly concerned about the statement printed in *Variety* to the effect that only twenty per cent of the so-called amateurs are genuine. Our correspondence convinces us that the public is beginning to realize that the term "amateur" must be taken with generous helpings of salt. What we do challenge vigorously is the feeble justification offered for prolonging the amateur hour cycle in radio.

The excuse heard most frequently is that it discovers new talent. What for? The graduates of the amateur hour who have received radio contracts may be counted on the fingers of one hand. Certainly, none of them have become the big "name" stars of radio in the past two years. The contestants who obtain vaudeville engagements are dropped after a while to yield to a new crop of vote-winners. The balance of those who flock to New York City in the hope of appearing on one of the better-known programs, are stranded at the rate of three hundred a week, according to a recent report of the Emergency Relief Transit Bureau. Incidentally, they are the guests of the taxpayers of the City who unwittingly bear this added burden. Some of the programs announce that only people residing in New York are eligible, but since all would-be stars file a brief personal history with their application, it can be no secret that most of them come from out of town.

Booking agents cannot begin to place all the artists from the legitimate, vaudeville and concert stage who are available for "cakes and coffee". Swelling the hordes of these are an ever-increasing number of ex-amateurs, who, having had a taste of the glamour of the stage, are reluctant to return to their former trades. Every large radio studio has lists of artists who have

successfully passed audition tests and are now waiting for an opening.

The closing down of vaudeville on the Loew and RKO circuits means that engagements for variety artists are limited to the few theatres which still have stage shows. In New York City, the center of the theatrical profession, only one vaudeville theatre and two picture houses showing stage shows remain. To be very practical, this means that in the Times Square district approximately two dozen acts a week are employed, and to fill them, there are thousands of trained performers available. The tales these people could tell would probably eclipse in pathos any sob-story told on an amateur hour.

Nevertheless, despite this oversupply of talent, the amateur hour continues—because it is cheaper to produce; because those who are making money out of the idea are anxious to keep it alive; because clever publicity build-ups give the impression that the entire country is clamoring for amateurs; and finally, because the sponsors are also advertisers in magazines and newspapers, and as a matter of good business, attacks on their programs are soft-pedalled.

We suggest that amateur hours be converted into variety programs, employing concert and dramatic artists, vaudeville actors, and a master of ceremonies to preserve continuity. Rudy Vallee and Paul Whiteman have made a success of this type of program without the addition of heart throbs.

Long before amateur hours became epidemic, Roxy and Major Bowes periodically discovered new talent which they proceeded to promote. Orchestra leaders always have delighted in adopting and developing prodigies. However, it might be more efficient for all concerned were radio production managers, music and dramatic critics, and orchestra leaders to organize a national committee to pass upon aspirants for a career in radio, the theatre or the concert hall. Sub-committees appointed in large cities throughout the country could care for applicants outside of New York City. The young people requiring additional training would be given practical advice by the experts on the committees; the others who were ready to begin their careers would certainly have a better opportunity to succeed than present-day aspirants who take the heart-breaking journey from obscurity to fleeting fame to oblivion, via the amateur hour.

## *Twisting the Dial—News and Comment*

We never thought we would live to see the day when a commercial credit would actually prove to be the highlight of a program, but this did happen a few weeks ago on WOR's "Good Evening Serenade". And did you know that those obliging United Cigar Store salesmen will bathe the baby or feed your canary while you visit Aunt Tillie?

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John Charles Thomas has gone back to programs more in keeping with his position in the musical world, and we notice all the newspaper radio critics are applauding. If you didn't hear Mr. Thomas a few weeks ago in Gilbert and Sullivan's "Trial by Jury" you missed a treat.

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If you have a short wave set, tune in some Tuesday, Thursday or Sunday to W1XAL, between the hours of four and seven o'clock, EST. This station is dedicated to education, and professors from Boston and Harvard universities are frequently heard.

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We have no way of keeping tabs on the number of times a popular hit is played over the radio, but it seems to us the music from "Top Hat" must have passed its millionth rendition by this time.

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John Wanamaker is on the air, sponsoring an hour of good music five nights a week over W2XR, the station which specializes in quality music.

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Listen to "Your English" some Sunday afternoon and be sure the children are gathered round when you tune in. They will enjoy the lessons dramatized in interesting fashion on this program, and will probably take fiendish delight in correcting your speech for days after, if they are like some boys we know.

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Suggested for the next book of similes: As persistently as a radio tenor hangs on to those high notes.

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From comments we have heard recently, that Sunday night coffee program seems to be divided pretty evenly into three parts: coffee advertising, amateurs, and publicizing the master of ceremonies.

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We still think WOR leads the field in station-created music. The Wallenstein Sinfonietta and his String Sinfonia; Philip James' Little Symphony, and the new Master Musician series on Sunday evenings make that station stand out.

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We have yet to receive our first letter praising a "torch" or "blues" singer. After listening to the introductions which usually precede their efforts we have come to the conclusion that most of them are chosen for their pulchritude,



rather than for any vocal ability. Maybe it would be a good idea to have would-be sponsors blindfolded while they listen to prospects.

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The Firestone Hour is frequently mentioned in our correspondence. Light music sung by Margaret Speaks without frills or furbelows, and the accompaniment by William Daly's orchestra make this a pleasant half hour.

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Have you discovered Bob Burns yet? He is generally heard on the Whiteman Hour and his Arkansas drawl is most ingratiating.

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We don't know who originated the idea of having the second chorus of every dance number sung by a member of the orchestra, but having groaned through countless performances by would-be vocalists, we welcome the news that Messrs. Frank Black and Al Goodman are starting a trend back to straight playing of dance music, with no megaphoning of the second chorus.

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Those anguished cries heard over the entire country every Sunday evening come from the thousands of radio listeners who must decide between the Benny and Woollcott programs, when they would like to hear both.

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We must confess there are lots of things about the broadcasting business we cannot understand, and here's one of them. Richard Blondell's Story Teller's House is, in our estimation, the finest children's program on the air. However, it is presented at a morning hour when most children are in school. How about changing the time, WOR?

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All the symphony orchestras are coming back to the air, and we are particularly pleased to hear that this season the Boston Symphony will be heard regularly on NBC, although only half the concert is presented, unfortunately. We now have enough orchestral music to satisfy anyone, but song, piano and violin literature remain the stepchildren of radio. We suggest that some of the mediocre jazz bands heard on sustaining hours be cancelled and the time utilized to experiment in this comparatively untouched field.

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Lois Long brings a sophisticated woman's hour to the air for the first time, and if you are a New Yorker (the magazine) fan, as we are, you are familiar with her flippant, amusing style. Miss Long's program is totally different from any other and, with one exception, the series has been highly entertaining. The exception is the program on which Dwight Fiske appeared as guest artist. Mr. Fiske definitely is not fitted for radio, and we cannot understand how his material slipped past the program department at Columbia. People who go to night clubs and musical comedies expect to hear risqué songs and humor, but even these same people resent having vulgarity invade their homes.

## *Our Listening Groups Report*

. . . that they wish some station would put on a half-hour or hour program of good dinner music like the old Black-and-Gold Room dinner concerts.

. . . that Burns and Allen's new sponsor is interfering with their delightful nonsense by injecting too much "juice" into the program.

. . . that they wish Fred Allen would go back to straight comedy, sans amateurs. His distinctive style is wasted on the rubber-stamp portion of his present program.

. . . that they wish some announcers wouldn't speak so quickly, as it makes them feel "hectic".

. . . that their children love the band music played by the United States Army, Navy and Marine Bands. Maybe some sponsor will get away from comic strip entertainment on the air and give them band music to sell cereal.

. . . that they agree with our opinion of the Squibb program and are enjoying it very much.

Most frequently complained about last month: The advertising on Capt. Tim Healy's program, because it is too good to spoil by having Capt. Healy write Ivory Soap ads into his manuscript.

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## *New Programs in Review*

EDDIE CANTOR. Columbia Network. Sunday, 8:00 to 8:30 P. M. EST.

Eddie Cantor, the delight of studio audiences, is back, and judging from the loud applause heard every few minutes on the radio, must be giving great satisfaction to those who have passes for the Cantor show. As for the radio audience—a minor consideration, apparently, in the Cantor scheme of things—Eddie does condescend to sing into the microphone twice on every program. If you are one of those ungrateful wretches who can't appreciate Eddie's generosity in letting us hear the laughter which greets his studio clowning, you can turn to the pleasant light musical program on WJZ and the Blue Network during one of those long pauses when Eddie is waiting for the visible audience to "catch on".

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WALTER O'KEEFE. Columbia Network. Tuesday and Thursday evenings, 9:00 to 9:30 P. M. EST.

Don't think all the good comedians are to be heard only on Sundays, if you haven't tried to find one during the week. Walter O'Keefe is as funny as some you hear more about, and funnier than most. We like Walter and predict he will be near the top of the polls for favorite comedians when the season is further along. The Casa Loma Orchestra adds to the enjoyment, but we could dispense with the "blues" singing.

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CAVALCADE OF AMERICA. Columbia Network. Wednesday, 8:00 to 8:30 P. M. EST.

When big business attempts to blaze new trails and presents an educational program, we think it is time to cheer. The story of America's progress is drama as absorbing as fiction, and on this half-hour it is particularly entertaining. Well-known actors appear in the principal roles to enhance the pleasure of the listeners. Don't let the word "educational" fool you, for this program will hold your interest from start to finish. We recommend it especially as family entertainment, and suggest that the children be allowed to sit up and hear it. The DuPont modest commercials deserve an extra round of applause.

ALEXANDER WOOLLCOTT. Columbia Network. Sunday evening, 7:00 to 7:30 P.M. EST.

The Town Crier, our favorite raconteur, has returned after an absence all too long and this enthusiastic reporter is prepared to gorge her family with Cream of Wheat if the sponsor will devote less time to commercials and give us every possible moment of Mr. Woollcott. In this series he is even more entertaining than ever—if it is possible for Mr. Woollcott to eclipse his brilliant successes of previous seasons.

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JACK BENNY AND MARY LIVINGSTONE. NBC Blue Network, Sunday evening, 7:00 to 7:30 P.M. EST.

The most imitated team in radio, but no one else has ever quite managed to catch that suave Benny touch or Livingstone pertness. In thousands of homes, fans settle back with a sigh of contentment when the familiar "Jello, again—" is heard, knowing that Jack and Mary will not disappoint them. They tell us, however, that they miss Frank Parker. Johnny Green's Orchestra specializes in symphonic jazz which we much prefer to jazzed symphony.

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LESLIE HOWARD. Columbia Network. Sunday evening, 8:30 to 9:00 P. M. EST.

At the risk of being scolded by some radio editor for indulging in superlatives, we must say that here is radio's finest dramatic actor. While "The Amateur Gentleman" is not up to the standard of some of the stage productions in which Mr. Howard has been seen, it is absorbing throughout and every member of the cast is well chosen. This is another program for the whole family to enjoy, for which many thanks to the sponsor. The only fault we have to find with it is that listeners are forced to wallow in Honey and Almond Cream in one long boresome commercial, rudely jarring the pleasant mood established by the program.

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GENERAL MOTORS SYMPHONY. NBC Red Network. Sunday, 10:00 to 11:00 P. M. EST.

In the serious music division, this is still the best sponsored program. The first half of the series is featuring well-known musical artists, and we understand the second half will again present visiting conductors.

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THE NEW PENNY. NBC Blue Network. Tuesday evening, 9:30 to 10:00 P.M. EST.

What was our astonishment, as this serial began to unfold, to find that it was suspiciously like The Story of Helen Trent, with some slight revisions. There is the same divorce in the very beginning, the kind friend of the family who is a lawyer this time instead of a doctor, the orphan who is adopted, and the same laughs-between-tears background. The one great difference is that this program has Helen Hayes, whose artistry makes the totally inadequate vehicle seem like a superb production. As a Helen Hayes fan who would enjoy hearing her recite the alphabet, we can only sigh, as we listen faithfully every week, and wish the manuscript measured up to the magnificent acting of its star. P.S. In the interests of accurate reporting we must state that out of appreciation of the good taste with which the commercials are handled, we purchased and sampled some Sanka coffee: but our indignation at having to hear Helen Hayes in a nondescript play kept us awake anyway.

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