

“Fibber McGee and Molly” (March 4, 1940)

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Essay by Cary O’Dell



The Jordans in character



Artist’s rendering



Jim and Marian Jordan

One of radio’s most famous, popular and long-lasting comedies, “Fibber McGee and Molly” was the creation of married performers and former vaudevillians Jim and Marian Jordan and the talented gag writer Don Quinn. Quinn was a former newspaper cartoonist who had switched to radio after the Depression dealt a temporary blow to the newspaper industry. After serving an extended apprenticeship in Chicago-area radio (the trio all hailed from Illinois), and performing in various local programs, including the transitional comedy “Smackout” (based around a general store that was always “smack out” of everything but tall tales), “Fibber McGee and Molly” debuted over NBC Blue on April 16, 1935. It switched to NBC Red in 1939.

“Fibber” told the story of a middle-aged, middle-class, married--though curiously childless—couple. Fibber McGee (whose first name reflected his tendency to stretch the truth) and his patient wife Molly who lived simply in a small town in a house located at 79 Wistful Vista and were regularly visited by a wide assortment of friends and neighbors who dropped by to chat. In many ways, the lead and title character of “Fibber McGee” was the first of what would become a popular, enduring sitcom archetype. An overconfident, long-winded bumbler, Fibber laid the groundwork for generations of later hapless husbands on radio and the small screen from “The Life of Riley” to “The Honeymooners” to “Home Improvement.” Similarly, his long-suffering, epically-patient wife, Molly, who has been described as “faithful, strong, a woman of rugged pioneer stock,” helped pave the way for all the latter-day Alice Kramdens, women who inevitably end up having to save the world from their husbands and their husbands from themselves. The essence of the couple’s characters and relationship is summed up, fitfully, in this on-air exchange:

Fibber: Why, if this idea of mine goes the way I think it will, we’ll most likely move into the White House.

Molly: And if it goes the way your ideas usually do, we’ll move into the dog house.

Equal parts folksy and funny, humor for the show—which could range from the spectacularly witty to the extraordinarily corny—was found in the characters, in word plays (“slapstick of the tongue”), fractured similes (i.e. “Them springs are tighter than a forty-dollar girdle after a spaghetti dinner”), and the long, highly alliterative speeches Fibber often gave, always to the amusement and astonishment of the listening audience.

Like that other radio ne-er-do-well Ozzie Nelson, “Fibber McGee’s” Fibber seemed to have no source of income and not much more ambition. The couple supposedly acquired their house via a raffle. Such personal limitations did not prevent Fibber however from repeatedly offering unsolicited advice or sticking his nose into city business or attempting to take the running of the household away from Molly, usually via the unnecessary “fixing” of something that wasn’t even broken. Yet despite his bluster and general busy-body-ness, Fibber was not depicted as an unlikable sort. His attempts at both help and humor were harmless; his opinions (unlike, say, TV’s Archie Bunker later) were benign; his actions were always too ineffectual to pose any sort of threat. Besides, any and all of Fibber’s flights of fancy could always easily be curtailed by Molly, usually with her famous line “T’ain’t funny, McGee,” an expression that would become one of the program’s many popular catch phrases.

While the core of the show was the bantering—though not bickering—between husband and wife Fibber and Molly, the program garnered its greatest mileage from its vast roster of reoccurring, supporting characters. A single installment could see the arrival and departure of half a dozen characters into and out of the McGees’ home at 79 Wistful Vista. In fact, the sheer volume of human traffic into and out of the McGees’ well-traveled living room could be, at times, jarring as it conjured up images not of friendly neighbors dropping by but of radio actors moseying up to the mike. And yet despite this surrealistic aspect, audiences willingly bought into the McGee universe and its numerous inhabitants.

Over the run of the series, dozens of characters were created and interacted with the McGees. They were oddly named, funny-voice small town archetypes which ranged from snooty so-called “society” ladies to long-winded local politicians. Often their exotic names mirrored their personalities: the ineffectual Mayor La Trivia, the uppity Mrs. Abigail Uppington, the wimpy Wallace Wimple and the “friendly undertaker,” Digger O’Dell. The program even utilized a stable of so-called “silent” characters, individuals referred to often but never actually heard. These included Molly’s drunken Uncle Dennis and Myrt, the town’s telephone operator with whom Fibber shared many a one-sided conversation. In their embracing of small town eccentrics, “Fibber” prefigured a host of shows, both radio and television, that would build upon this formula. Certainly it is the milieu that Paul Henning mined so thoroughly in his highly-successful 1960s rural TV sitcoms “Green Acres” and “Petticoat Junction.” It also presaged the bizarre hamlets of “Northern Exposure” and “Twin Peaks,” and even radio’s own “Prairie Home Companion.”

Among the show’s most notable breakout characters were Throckmorton Philharmonic Gildersleeve (a.k.a. “The Great Gildersleeve”), a neighbor who happened to be an even

bigger blowhard than Fibber. The character made his first “McGee and Molly” appearance in 1937. As with all the others, Gildersleeve was always popping into the McGees’ for something only to end up in a verbal sparing match with Fibber. Fibber’s common man outlook had no use for any type of authority figure, from local politicians to even police officers, nor anyone who put on airs, something that Gildersleeve, the boastful owner of his own girdle factory, regularly and promiscuously did. The masculine feuding between Fibber and Gildersleeve was constant; once they even attacked each other with garden hoses while watering their lawns. Each confrontation almost always ended with an exasperated Gildersleeve exiting and muttering his own catch phrase, “You’re a haaaard man, McGee.” Gildersleeve, funny in his pomposity, eventually became so popular that he garnered his own radio spin-off show (radio’s first) in 1941. Later, “The Great Gildersleeve,” as he and his show were known, were featured in a handful of films and on a short-lived 1955 television series.

As well-known and enduring as Gildersleeve was the McGees’ African-American maid Beulah, whose opening salvo of “Somebody bawl fo’ Beulah?” followed “T’ain’t funny” into the American lexicon. Beulah (who originally debuted on the series in 1944) proved so popular that she, too, was eventually spun off into her own radio series and, eventually, onto television in the early 1950s. Shockingly, this female, African-American character was originally portrayed, not by a black actress, but by a white male, actor Marlin Hurt. For audience members able to attend a performance of “Fibber” (done in a theatre with the microphone center stage, as most comedic radio shows were done at the time), the sound of “Beulah’s” flawless falsetto emerging from such an unexpected source was a guaranteed gut-buster. Yet, despite the character’s stereotypical underpinnings and her disturbing casting, the Beulah character was actually one of the show’s most mature and certainly even-keeled creations. If anything, she was one of the few characters on the show who always remained unphased by Fibber’s loquaciousness, even appreciative of his humor. Her famous exit line, “Love dat man,” was about Fibber and seemed to convey her tolerance, understanding and overall bemusement over her unique boss.

Finally, a little neighbor girl Teeney, wonderfully voiced by Marian Jordan and supposedly based upon the Jordans’ real-life daughter, appeared often and, along with Baby Snooks and Red Skelton’s Mean Widdle Kid, was another of early radio’s mischievous child personages. As with Beulah and her other on-show compatriots, Teeney too had her own catch phrases that served as both identifier and descriptor. Teeney’s “Whatcha doin’, huh, mister, whatcha?” and her oft-repeated refrain of “You betcha” regularly drove Fibber to distraction. Thanks to her energy, rambunctiousness and own skewed way of thinking, Teeney was one of the show’s few characters who could fluster Fibber as thoroughly as he flustered others.

Along with its plethora of reoccurring characters and famous catch phrases (which also included the well-remembered “Heavenly days!,” Molly’s favorite exclamation), the program was also known for its repeated punchlines and reoccurring gags. In its use of recurrent one-liners and punchlines--for which only the context around the joke changed

--“Fibber” seem to lay the groundwork for an entire school of cultural comedy, including such TV fare as “Get Smart” and every reoccurring sketch on any incarnation of “Saturday Night Live.”

Certainly the show’s most famous, long-lasting gag—heard for the first time on March 5, 1940--was the McGees’ front room, painfully over-stuffed closet which, when opened, resulted in a cascading crescendo of props supposedly consisting of golf clubs, roller skates, musical instruments, a pith helmet, a sword, and a spear gun. Always the avalanche concluded with the twinkling sound of a tiny bell, the perfect understated coda for the tsunami that preceded it. The effect, which the show’s prop master/sound effects man created by unleashing a torrent of props down a set of portable stairs, was another of the show’s surrealistic touches as it was supposedly such a magnitude of clutter it regularly toppled and buried Fibber alive. Once it was even used to capture two unsuspecting, would-be robbers who Fibber skillfully tricked into opening that dangerous door.

The closet gag was enacted on radio over 200 times and the phrase “Fibber’s closet” entered the American lexicon to describe any overstuffed space perilously close to exploding. In time the mere anticipation of the gag on the show was enough to elicit laughs from the audience. Why the closet gag resonated so strongly with radio audiences is open to speculation. Certainly its torrent of sound effects lent itself well to the radio medium, as did its surrealistic undertones: from Gracie Allen’s weird linguistics to Jack Benny’s supposed subterranean vault, radio audiences of the time showed a high tolerance for fanciful, far-fetched elements in comedy programming. Of course, Fibber’s closet could also be viewed as metaphor. Though many listeners no doubt related to cramped spaces, especially during the US’ war and post-war years, this over-flowing space seemed to symbolize more than just the sum of its junk. It was, in many ways, representative of the McGees’ (and, by default, all of America’s) well-stocked lives, lives which, though not perfect and temporarily undermined by both the Depression and later the war, remained chocked-full of friends and neighbors, love and good humor.

Despite some of its more surrealistic elements, Quinn and the Jordans worked hard to adhere to a small-town authenticity. They strictly followed the policy that if it couldn’t happen in their hometown of Peoria, Illinois, then it couldn’t happen on the show. Even a few “in” jokes meant just for the writers or only the show’s most devoted listeners bespoke of the program’s “Our Town” sensibility; for example, how every business and other house in town on the show was always referred to as being located at the intersection of 14th and Oak. Quinn’s number one rule for radio comedy: “Keep it clean and keep it simple.”

It was certainly this philosophy which helped to make the show at first popular and then an institution on the air for over 20 years, eventually launching several feature films starring the Jordans and later, briefly, a television series. In 1941, “Fibber McGee and Molly” was the most popular radio show on the air, regularly pulling in a weekly audience of between 20 and 30 million listeners. For the remainder of the decade it would remain in the top five, shuffling places with the likes of Jack Benny, Bob Hope

and Edgar Bergen. Its appeal seemed to lay in its engaging cast and gentle humor and in its bigger than life yet still relatable characters and in its total lack of pretentiousness (a lack of pretension even Fibber himself would have admired). The program was and always remained a comforting anecdote in difficult times; in the words of one author, “a home remedy for a shaken, insecure, Depression-era America that needed reassuring that its values were still intact.”

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