

“Stan Freberg Presents the United States of America, Vol. 1: The Early Years”--Stan Freberg (1961)

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Essay by Dr. Demento (guest post)*



Stan Freberg

With “Stan Freberg Presents the United States of America,” Stan Freberg created not only one of the greatest comedy albums of all time, but also an invaluable teaching aid for generations of high school and college American history courses.

Released in 1961, the album retells the history of the USA from the voyage of Columbus through the Revolutionary War, as a series of comedy sketches with musical transitions, songs and sound effects.

Using many of the most accomplished voice actors of the time, Freberg makes such historical figures as Christopher Columbus, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin and Betsy Ross, not to mention Yankee Doodle, say things they might well have said if only they were as witty as Freberg.

This album was the culmination of a decade of brilliant comedy records. On his first hit, 1951’s “John and Marsha,” he impersonates the voices of two typical radio soap-opera characters. All they say is each other’s names, but with an impressive range of voices, and appropriately sappy music, Stan creates a masterful satire. After spoofs of the early-fifties recording stars Johnnie Ray and Les Paul & Mary Ford, Stan joined up with voice-over stars Daws Butler and June Foray to lampoon the era’s most popular radio and TV drama, the cop show “Dragnet,” starring Jack Webb. Webb loved the idea of relocating “Dragnet” to the Middle Ages so much that he arranged for Stan to use the original “Dragnet” music cues for “St. George and the Dragonet.” It became the biggest comedy record hit of the decade, selling two million copies. Later in the 1950s, came marvelous spoofs of Elvis Presley, Harry Belafonte’s “Calypso” album, Lawrence Welk and many others, along with his highly controversial but hilarious satire of holiday commercialism, “Green Christmas.”

When comedy LP's by artists such as Shelley Berman and Bob Newhart began selling millions in 1959-1960, Stan had little trouble persuading Capitol to greenlight the project that became "The United States of America."

Born in 1926 and raised in Pasadena, California, the son of a Baptist minister, Stan Freberg grew up delighted by network radio shows like the quirky homespun sitcom "Vic and Sade," the comedy of Jack Benny and Fred Allen, and the dramas of Norman Corwin. In high school, he wrote and performed a make-believe radio sitcom for a student assembly. He played all the parts, with sound effects and recorded music. The performance was a great success.

Stan graduated with a scholarship to Stanford, but remembering how thrilled he'd been by the laughter of his Alhambra High classmates, he felt he had to try something different. He took a bus to Hollywood Boulevard, walked into the first talent agency he saw, and wangled an audition. Bowled over by Stan's repertoire of funny voices, the agent placed a call to Warner Brothers' animation department, and within three days Stan was performing voices for Warner Bros. cartoons. Before he was drafted for service in World War II, Stan built an impressive resume of cartoon and radio voice work, including regular comedy bits on a popular daily country-style radio show hosted by Cliffie Stone.

The Army put his talents to good use entertaining wounded soldiers. After his discharge, Freberg resumed his cartoons and radio appearances before taking a "permanent" job as a comedian with a Spike Jones-type troupe called Red Fox (*not* the "Sanford and Son" star) and his Musical Hounds. While performing comedy bits on stage, two shows a night, he came up with a short satire of radio soap operas, which evolved into "John and Marsha." Cliffie Stone, by that time a top-selling Capitol Records artist, hired Stan for his own performing troupe, then brought him to Capitol where he soon became one of the label's best-selling artists.

In 1957, CBS Radio hired Stan to replace its top-rated comedian, Jack Benny, who had decided to concentrate on television. CBS gave Stan enough budget to hire the first-class voice actors he'd used on his hit records, as well as an orchestra, and the expertise of the network's veteran sound-effects crew. With "The Stan Freberg Show," Freberg's ambitious plans for "theater of the mind" became reality. Such episodes as "Bang Gunleigh, US Marshall Field," "Freberg In Advertisingland," "Elderly Man River" (satirizing censorship) and "Incident at Los Voraces" (a futuristic tale of the immolation of Las Vegas) were loved by thinking listeners but horrified CBS' nervous executives. Prospective advertisers were just as jittery and CBS found it could not sell enough commercial time to justify the show's budget, especially since Stan's contract (at his insistence) prohibited cigarette commercials on the show.

"The Stan Freberg Show" was cancelled after only 15 episodes. It turned out to be the last original comedy series CBS Radio ever broadcast.

After a few more comedy singles (including his biting satire of rock 'n roll and the late 1950s payola scandal, "The Old Payola Roll Blues"), Stan turned his talents to American history with this album, first released in 1961. Though it was only a modest hit on its initial release, peaking at #34 on the LP sales charts, it continued to sell steadily for many years. History teachers and

their students alike loved the way it made all those 18th century figures seem real and those long-ago events come alive.

“Important” people were impressed with the album as well, including mega-producer David Merrick, who made plans for a full-fledged Broadway musical. With a prodigious burst of energy, Stan wrote additional scripts and songs to bring the story up to the present day. Rather than recording his new work for Capitol, he began adapting the work for Broadway under Merrick’s supervision. Before long, however, “creative differences” developed, capped by Merrick’s sudden demand that he “take Lincoln out of the Civil War--he doesn’t work!”

That was too much for Freberg, who had always demanded that his work have integrity as well as humor. He immediately caught a plane back to Los Angeles, locked away everything related to the US of A. project, and resumed what was already becoming a brilliant and highly remunerative career in advertising, which had begun in 1956 with “Who Puts Eight Great Tomatoes In That Little Bitty Can” for Contadina tomato paste. Award-winning and profit-making campaigns for Chun King chow mein, Sunsweet prunes, Butter-Nut coffee and many others continued through the 1960s and onward.

A quarter century after the release of “SFPTUS of A” people were still badgering Stan to produce Volume 2 for records, and, in 1996, he finally did, for Rhino. Recapturing the sound and spirit of the original with a mostly new cast, he brought the story up through World War I. He was looking forward to bringing the story up to the late 20th century, licking his chops at the thought of satirizing what rock music had become since the days of “American Bandstand” and the payola scandal. Alas, Freberg died before those dreams could come true (passing in 2015, at age 88) but this totally unique and spectacular album lives on, hopefully to inspire many more generations of American history students.

Dr. Demento (a.k.a. Barret Hansen) has been a radio fixture since 1970 when he began on local LA station KPPC. His weekly radio show was nationally syndicated from 1978 to 1992 and continues to this day as an online version at www.DrDemento.com. His newest album is “Dr. Demento Covered in Punk” (www.coveredinpunk.com)

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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