

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

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Essay by Cary O'Dell



Fred Allen

Though not as well remembered today as some of his broadcast contemporaries—namely Jack Benny and Bob Hope—Fred Allen was, during the Golden Age of Radio, one of the medium’s biggest stars and most respected purveyors of aural comedy. Though Allen, like most of his brethren, began in vaudeville and, originally, brought that aesthetic to the airwaves, with time, his on-air comedy morphed into a more cerebral style one truly based in satire, and on character and current events. He was viewed in his day as a comedian’s comedian and recognized even at the time as a cut above the standard over-the-air jokester. Writer John Steinbeck once said of Allen, “[he’s] unquestionably the best humorist of our time.”

Fred Allen was born John Sullivan in 1894 in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He gravitated early to show business. By age 18, he was working in vaudeville doing comedy and juggling (the latter, rather poorly, by his own estimation). Originally, he billed himself as Fred St. James, later adopting the last name “Allen” from his agent. Allen worked the vaudeville circuit for years before eventually making it to Broadway in 1922.

Allen broke into radio in 1932 as the host of “The Linit Bath Club Revue.” This 30-minute, weekly program starred Allen and Allen’s wife, Portland Hoffa, a former chorus girl who affected a squeaky, high-pitched voice (perhaps steaming from stage fright) for her on-air persona. After a variety of title changes, including “Town Hall Tonight,” Allen’s program became “The Fred Allen Show” beginning in 1939.

Under any title, Allen’s program often contained the same elements including: a mock newscast riffing on the week’s events (a precursor to “SNL’s” “Weekend Update” and Comedy Central’s “The Daily Show”); an amateur talent segment (then unknowns Garry Moore and Frank Sinatra both appeared on Allen’s show); and comedy sketches enacted by the Mighty Allen Art Players (later the inspiration for Johnny Carson’s Mighty Carson Art Players on “The Tonight Show”).

Allen’s show was also highly self-reflexive at least in terms of radio. He often commented in comedy on some of the medium’s other then-big names and programs. (A sample: “That joke sounds like something off the bottom of ‘Can You Top This?’”) Most famously he initiated a long-standing “feud” with fellow comic Jack Benny where the two traded barbs via their respective shows, and sometimes face to face. The fighting proved popular and long-lasting; it endured well into the late 1940s.

To feed his intellect and to gain fodder for his weekly show, which by 1934 was an hour in length, Allen voraciously read all the daily newspapers he could get his hands on, even often having them flown to him when he was out of town. This satirizing could be cutting and though audiences loved it, network censors didn't always follow suit. In what we would now label "political correctness" run amok, Allen was often ordered by the network to get prior permission before mentioning or alluding to any known person or even place. With the exception of perhaps Mae West, Allen, more than other radio entity of the era, struggled the most against radio standards and practices.

All in all, Allen's show, though very much in the idiom of the comedy-variety genre of the era, was still a far cry from others also practicing the art at that time i.e. the sound effects-laden antics of Eddie Cantor or the over-the-top silliness of Ed Wynn.

The weekly pressure to riff on the news as well as his frequent run-ins with censors, eventually took its toll on Allen who left the air in 1944 due to dangerously high blood pressure.

Yet Allen would return to the airwaves the following year with a mix of the old and the new. His commentary continued to be highly timely—his debut episode mainly addressed the post-war housing crisis. And on his "new" show, he would, once again, journey down Allen's Alley.

Begun in 1942, "Allen's Alley" (almost a show within a show) was a popular segment of Allen's programs. It was a weekly trip down a make believe and surrealistic street where one was likely to run into just about anyone regardless of age, nationality or even common sense. It was yet another of radio's quaint, odd little hamlets, not unlike the ones inhabited on "Fibber McGee and Molly" and "Vic and Sade."

In this installment from October 7, 1945, while moseying down Allen Alley's, Allen, accompanied by Portland Hoffa, encounters reoccurring character Mrs. Pansy Nussbaum (played by Minerva Pious), the Jewish and heavily accented housewife, who often spoke of her husband, who was surprisingly named Pierre. Like radio's other major yenta, Molly Goldberg of "The Goldbergs," Mrs. Nussbaum often had some trouble with the English language. But her malapropisms were delivered with such heart that they were rendered inoffensive and funny. Mrs. N. also had other things going for her. She always had a ready wit. When Allen would knock on her door and greet her with an "Ah, Mrs. Nussbaum," the lady of the house always shot back with a line like "Who were you expecting, Weinstein Churchill?" (Other times she suggested "Turaluralura Bankhead" and "Cecil B. Schlemeil.")

In this episode, for the first time, Allen in the Alley also runs into one Senator Beauregard Claghorn, a proud and blustery Southerner ("Where I live we call people from Alabama 'Yankees'!").

Voiced by radio announcer Kenny Delmar, Claghorn was based on a Texas rancher who once gave Delmar a lift. Claghorn had a deep Southern drawl, a tendency to stutter and repeat himself ad nauseam. He also tended to end many statements with an explanation i.e. "That's a joke, son!" Like some later day "Saturday Night Live" personages, Claghorn soon became a breakout character, quickly cottoned on to by the public. Soon, he would start being referenced in other radio shows and his catch phrases would catch on throughout the country. The character would even begin to appear on shirts and other products. In 1947, he (as played by Kenny Delmar) even starred in his own feature film, the not surprisingly titled "It's a Joke, Son." Most enduringly, Claghorn served as a major influence for the cartoon character Foghorn Leghorn, the Mel Blanc-voiced cartoon rooster created by Robert McKimson. Foghorn first hit in the screen in 1946.

In this same October 1945 episode, after concluding his trip down the Alley, Allen still finds time to exchange a few quips with guest stars Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy. Show regulars, the singing DeMarco Sisters, also have time to chime in with a number of their own.

This incarnation of the radio's "The Fred Allen Show" would be its last one, remaining on the air until June 26, 1949 when declining ratings finally pushed it off the air. Like many other radio comics of the era, Allen transferred his talents to television. But unlike George and Gracie, Red Skelton and Jack Benny, TV and Fred Allen didn't mix that well. Attempts to package him into variety shows ("The Big Show"), sketch shows ("Fred Allen's Sketchbook") and as a game show host ("Judge for Yourself") were all short lived. He did find his niche however as one of the regular panelists on TV's "What's My Line?" where his intelligence and acerbic wit worked well in this humorously-played question-and-answer game. Allen joined the show in 1954 and stayed until his death in 1956.

Allen's lack of long-lasting success on TV, in contrast to the likes of Benny and Hope, and even "Amos 'n' Andy," may be one of the reasons he is less recalled today than some of his contemporaries. But this oversight does nothing to dull his importance. While his longevity speaks for itself, it is all those who have come along in his wake—be they on the stand-up stage, over the internet or via TV sketch comedy—that regularly attest to his massive influence.

Cary O'Dell is with the Motion Picture, Broadcast and Recorded Sound division of the Library of Congress. He is the author of the books "June Cleaver Was a Feminist!" (2014) and "Women Pioneers in Television" (1997). He also served as assistant editor of "The Concise Encyclopedia of American Radio" (2009) and "The Biographical Encyclopedia of American Radio" (2010).