ized music formats such as urban contemporary and alternative rock. But the voices of singers heard on radio, as during the Top 40 era, continue to emanate from popular recordings.

J. M. DEMPSEY

See also, in addition to individual formats discussed, Crosby, Bing; Formats; Grand Ole Opry; McLendon, Gordon; National Barn Dance; Recordings and the Radio Industry; Smith, Kate; Storz, Todd; Vallee, Rudy; Your Hit Parade

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Situation Comedy

Fibber McGee trying to get something out of his junk-filled hall closet without starting an avalanche; Amos 'n' Andy caught up in the Kingfish's latest scheme; Jack Benny considering his options when confronted by a mugger with the classic question, "Your money or your life"—these are but a few of the vivid memories from the "golden era" of radio situation comedy. With their offbeat personality flaws, idiosyncratic neighbors, and disrespectful domestic help, these characters were not just friends to their millions of listeners—they were "family."

Defining a Format

"Family" is, in fact, the linchpin of radio situation comedy. Unlike its comedy/variety relative, the "sitcom" retained the recurring cast of the dramatic serial. In fact, historians once labeled programs such as *The Goldbergs, Henry Aldrich,* and *The Life of Riley,* which we call situation comedies today, as "comedy dramas," thus emphasizing their dramatic story line. Each character in the situation comedy is often a two-dimensional parody of one or two human foibles. Listen to any classic radio sitcom and you often find the "drunk," the "tightwad," the "know-it-all," the "dumbbell," and many other stereotypes. These exaggerated personality flaws define each "family member," and determine how that character interacts with the rest of the show's family, and how he or she will deal with this week's adventure. Radio sitcoms are very consistent in basic structure, but they do vary in length. Although many radio sitcoms ran for 15 minutes, most eventually settled into the more popular 30-minute length. A few even stretch to 45 or 60 minutes, but these are rare.

In the simplistic world of the radio sitcom, with its recurring characters, settings, and themes, stories focus on the main character's adventures—be they big or small. Although most stories were about the central personality, episodes occasionally spotlighted secondary characters. Unlike the radio drama, though, the situation comedy played story lines for laughs.

The basic structure of a radio situation comedy is very consistent. The show's regular cast of characters is (re)introduced to the audience. At the same time, the "comfortable" environment of their sitcom world is made clear. Then someone or something upsets the routine, adding instability to this self-contained world. The story line takes the characters through a series of dramatic yet comic adventures, each one building until the climax of the show. Along the way the audience is exposed to "running gags" and a comedy of character that transcends the week's episode. The audience also hears commercials, sometimes performed by the characters and "subtly" embedded into the story. Although not a variety show, the radio sitcom would sometimes rely on such variety staples as musical numbers and celebrity guests. At the end of the comedy drama, the adventure is resolved, and the characters are back to where they started. Change is rarely permanent in the radio sitcom world.

The term *family* is used broadly when describing the sitcom cast of characters. It identifies traditional family members but also friends and coworkers. Any group of people that the main character spends significant amounts of time with and cares a great deal for make up his or her sitcom family. Because of this liberal definition of *family,* the situation comedy might be primarily centered on the home but might just as often gravitate to a social gathering place (such as a bar) or a work environment. Any time a small group of characters could gather together, interact, and share adventures, a situation comedy was born. Radio sitcoms have often appeared in the form of soap operas, adventure programs, science fiction, even as variety shows. In fact, among the earliest sitcoms were the fictional adventures of performers such as Jack Benny and Fred Allen as they went about the day-to-day tasks of putting on their variety shows!

An important characteristic of radio comedy was that the home audience had to imagine certain elements. Radio's lack of a visual element created "theater of the mind," allowing listeners to imagine Jack Benny's clunky old Maxwell car (played by veteran voice actor Mel Blanc) and to assume that the many characters in *Amos 'n' Andy* were actually African-American (when in fact they were initially all portrayed by two white actors, Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll). But in its early days, this radio format proved to be a challenge for its stars. Coming primarily from the vaudeville circuit, radio's comedians were accustomed to interacting directly with their audience, and they often relied on visual as well as verbal humor. The former problem was solved by adding an in-studio audience.

Origins

Both radio comedy/variety and situation comedy programs trace their roots to the days of the touring circuses, burlesque shows, medicine shows, musical reviews, and vaudeville companies that thrived from the late 19th century into the early 20th. Troupes of actors, singers, dancers, poets, and comics—plus an almost infinite variety of more esoteric acts (such as sword swallowers, jugglers, and animal acts)—would take their show on the road, playing in various towns and cities on a predetermined "circuit." The makeup of these troupes may have differed, but their basic components tended to be similar. An introduction by a master of ceremonies, emcee, or troupe manager would be followed by a wide variety of acts strung together with interim commentary by the emcee. This would often build up to a grand finish featuring a more extravagant sketch or a featured humorist or singer of the day. And in most of these forms, the salesman hawking his products—an early example of a program "sponsor"—was one of the more important parts of the show.

The typical nine-act vaudeville bill would usually include as its seventh act a full-stage comedy or drama playlet as a preliminary act to the bill's climactic eighth act—often a famous comedian or vocalist. Not every vaudeville house could afford playlets featuring well-known stars. Consequently, another sort of playlet, one that relied more upon action than upon stars, was developed. Most of these were comedies, and the vaudeville comic playlet became a well-recognized model for stage comedy. These comedies of situation structure are the ancestors of the modern sitcom.

When the radio networks were first looking for talent in the late 1920s, they turned to the vaudeville circuits for acts that might make the transition to an "audio-only" medium. Radio variety was born of this siphoning of vaudeville talent for use on radio. The radio programs usually included one or two hosts, whose presence provided a skeletal structure for the program, which would showcase a variety of acts by both new and established performers. Radio adopted many vaudeville program types. The situation comedy, or "comic playlet of situation," was one of the last formats borrowed from vaudeville, possibly because it did not promote star value as other formats did.

Sitcoms in Radio's Golden Era

Situation comedy premiered nationally during the 1929–30 radio season with *Amos 'n' Andy.* Soon, situation comedies such as *Our Miss Brooks, Beulah, Leave It to Joan, My Favorite Husband, The Goldbergs,* and *My Friend Irma* filled the airwaves, and a new genre for a new medium was born.

Many of the earliest radio sitcoms were not much more than a showcase for vaudeville and film comedians who cobbled together bits from their existing bag of tricks. The Marx Brothers' situation comedy *Flywheel, Shyster, and Flywheel*—a Monday night installment in the *Standard Oil Five Star Theater* series on the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) in the early 1930s—is a prime example. Ostensibly a sitcom about the mishaps of three "shyster" lawyers, scripts were

mostly a rehash of gags from the brothers' vaudeville and film performances.

Gradually, though, more and more of the comedy in radio sitcoms was based on character, plot, and story line. A large number of shows in the 1930s straddled the fence between sitcom and variety show. Stars such as Jack Benny "played themselves," and stories were set around their fictional adventures with their equally fictional friends, family, and coworkers. ("Real person" and radio sitcom star Fred Allen maintained a fake feud with Benny for years, although the two admired each other very much in real life.) In the work environment, stories often involved putting on the star's radio variety show; thus the situation comedy was able to sneak in many of the conventions of the variety format. Although Jack Benny's fictional variety show was never actually heard during the sitcom, audiences were treated to performances by guest acts during "rehearsals" that Jack and other characters were involved in "at the studio."

As radio and its audience evolved, so did the quantity and quality of its programs. The situation comedy became one of the staples of 1930s and 1940s radio entertainment. But sitcoms about "real people" were supplanted by the adventures of fictional characters. Stories about *Fibber McGee and Molly, Blondie,* and *Our Miss Brooks* soon dominated the airwaves. In another indicator of radio's impact, *Lum 'n' Abner* was set in the fictional town of Pine Ridge, Arkansas, and in 1936 the real Arkansas town of Waters changed its name to Pine Ridge in honor of the show.

Demise of the Radio Situation Comedy

As radio had borrowed from vaudeville, so television borrowed from radio—for both talent and program formats. Television's first situation comedies were "inherited" from radio, beginning with *The Goldbergs* and *The Life of Riley* in 1949. Network television turned to successful formats on radio, partly as a quick fix to find programming and partly to save money. Three-quarters of early television station owners were already radio station owners.

The direct ancestry of radio to television allowed radio to contribute format styles and even entire programs to the new medium. Many programs, such as *The Chesterfield Supper Club* (hosted by Perry Como), were simulcast in an effort to save money and provide programs for the new medium. Popular radio shows were not necessarily picked up by their respective networks' fledgling television franchises. The big-three radio networks soon foresaw that their future was in television, and bidding wars erupted for the most popular radio programs. Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) TV "stole" many popular radio shows from rival NBC's radio programs. NBC retaliated, and the American Broadcasting Companies (ABC) participated—but on a smaller scale. Radio networks became a less important part of the national media picture. Most of their familiar program formats shifted to television, as did advertiser dollars. Radio eventually evolved into a provider of music, talk, and news.

Many established radio stars, such as Jack Benny, Red Skelton, Bob Hope, and Fred Allen, attempted to make the transition to television. Some were successful, but others were not. There were many advantages for the situation comedy in the new medium. Viewers could now see how characters fit in with their surroundings. More important, thanks to the television camera, gestures and mannerisms assumed a role impossible on radio. However, there were quite a few problems to overcome in the transition. George Burns and Gracie Allen had to throw out their scripts and learn to memorize their complex verbal comedy routines, and cameras had to be placed so they did not block the live audience that Burns and Allen and other performers needed. Ironically, performers who, several decades earlier, had had to learn how to entertain through sound alone now had to relearn how to *appear* before an audience's very eyes and still stay in character.

When *The Jack Benny Show* first aired on television, Benny had several things to overcome. At first he could not decide between an hour format or a half hour, so he settled on 45 minutes for his debut program. Future programs settled into the increasingly popular half-hour mold. Sets had to be designed and built to portray what had been left to the imagination on radio. One-time scenes and elaborate sets, such as Benny's famous vault, had to be deleted because of cost or the inability to create them effectively. But now viewers could *see,* not just hear, Benny's slow burn and his look of malaise. Visuals added a wealth of information for the viewer, but producers had to spend a lot on props, costumes, and set pieces to show us all how cheap Jack was.

One of the biggest changes to a transitioning sitcom occurred on the new television version of *Amos 'n' Andy.* Because the entire cast of characters was black, but many of the roles had been played on radio by white series creators Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll, CBS decided to do a four-year talent search for experienced black comedy actors to portray the roles. Only African-American actors Ernestine Wade and Amanda Randolph were retained from the original radio cast. Like its radio ancestor, the television version of *Amos 'n' Andy* relied on many stereotypical sitcom personalities, including ignorant, naive, and conniving characters. During its run and afterward, many groups, such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), protested the wildly popular series because of its negative representation of blacks. In spite of these protests, CBS moved the popular radio show to television, and in 1951 *Amos 'n' Andy* became America's first television sitcom with an all-black cast (it ran for two seasons). The radio version continued but evolved into a quasi-variety show called *The Amos 'n' Andy Music Hall,* which ended in 1955.

By the mid-1950s radio sitcoms—like most network radio formats—had migrated almost completely to television. One strange "reverse crossover" was *My Little Margie,* a sitcom about a well-to-do widower and his 21-year-old daughter, who was intent on "protecting him" from various female suitors. The show premiered on CBS television in June 1952 for a three-month run. NBC ran the series for a few months before it resumed broadcast on CBS in January 1953. At about the same time, the series began producing new episodes for CBS network radio. The television series returned to NBC in September 1953 and stayed there until August 1955. The radio version remained on CBS, but it also ended in 1955.

Only three radio sitcoms, *Our Miss Brooks, The Great Gildersleeve,* and *Fibber McGee and Molly,* were still broadcast during the 1955–56 season. *Our Miss Brooks* began on CBS radio in 1948, but it began running on television as well in 1952 with almost the same cast. Both versions of the show ended in 1956. *Gildersleeve,* a character on the *Fibber McGee and Molly* show, spun off into his own radio series in 1941. Although it had a 15-year run on radio, *Gildersleeve* was not popular enough to make the transition to television. *Fibber McGee and Molly*—which aired for 22 years—left NBC radio in 1957, permanently closing the door on network radio's situation comedy closet. The show reappeared on NBC television for a very short 6-month run in 1959. The characters and situations in the McGee household did not transfer well to the new television neighborhood.

Although radio sitcoms ceased to air nationally in the United States in 1957, the format has not entirely disappeared. Occasionally, comedy dramas have been produced for American public radio. Imports from Canada, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), and other international markets have also made their way to American airwaves. One of the more popular of these was a BBC radio sitcom disguised as a science fiction episodic serial, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy.* It premiered in Great Britain in 1978 and traveled to American public radio in the early 1980s.

PHILIP J. AUTER

See also, in addition to performers and programs mentioned in this essay, Comedy; Variety Shows; Vaudeville

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