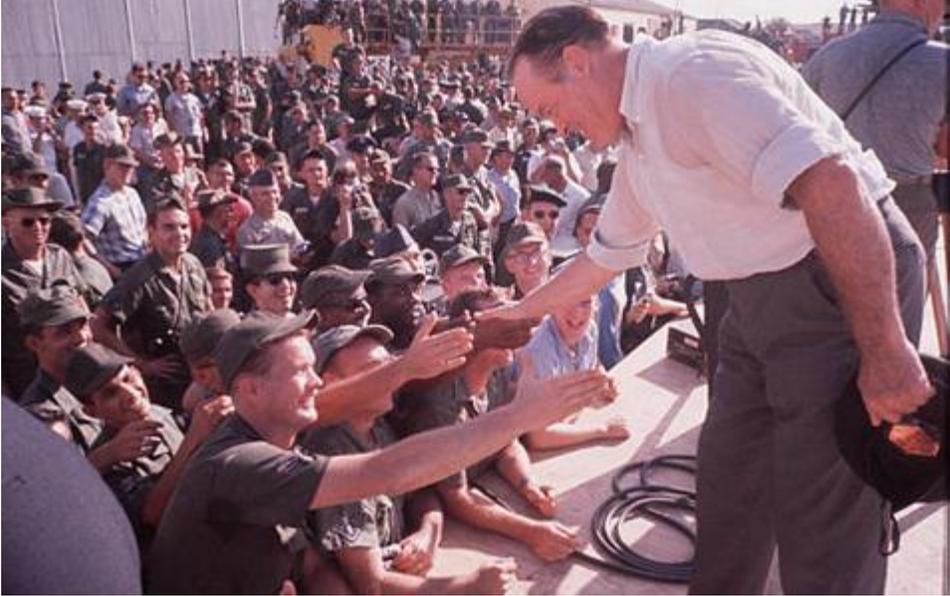


Before TV, a Funny Thing Called Radio



AP
Comedian Bob Hope
visits U.S. troops in
South Vietnam in 1964

STEVE EMBER: Welcome to THIS IS AMERICA in VOA Special English. I'm Steve Ember.

SHIRLEY GRIFFITH: And I'm Shirley Griffith. This week on our program, we bring you some laughs from old-time American radio shows.

LOU COSTELLO: "What I want to find out."

BUD ABBOTT: "I say Who's on first, What's on second, I Don't Know's on third."

STEVE EMBER: Bud Abbott and Lou Costello were two of America's funniest funnymen. Abbott and Costello appeared in theater, movies and television. But they owed much of their fame to radio, and a routine called "Who's On First?"

SHIRLEY GRIFFITH: Abbott plays a manager of a baseball team. Costello has trouble understanding that the players have funny nicknames, like Who.

COSTELLO: "You gonna be the coach, too?"

ABBOTT: "Yes."

COSTELLO: "And you don't know the fellows' names?"

ABBOTT: " Well, I should."

COSTELLO: "Well, then, who's on first?"

ABBOTT: "Yes."

COSTELLO: "I mean the fellow's name."

ABBOTT: "Who."

COSTELLO: "The guy on first."

ABBOTT: "Who."

COSTELLO: "The first baseman."

ABBOTT: "Who."

COSTELLO: "The first baseman."

ABBOTT: "Who."

ABBOTT: "Who is on first!"

COSTELLO: "I'm asking you who's on first."

ABBOTT: "That's the man's name."

COSTELLO: "That's who's name?"

ABBOTT: "Yes."

COSTELLO: "Well, go ahead and tell me."

ABBOTT: "That's it."

COSTELLO: "That's who?"

ABBOTT: "Yes."

STEVE EMBER: Another of America's great comedians was Fred Allen. As early as nineteen thirty-six, he had a weekly radio audience of about twenty million people. So says the Museum of Broadcast Communications in Chicago.

For almost twenty years, in the nineteen thirties and forties, Fred Allen had a radio show called "Allen's Alley." His career also included television and Broadway shows. Like many performers of his time, he started in vaudeville in the early nineteen hundreds. Vaudeville shows presented all kinds of entertainment.

He began as a juggler, someone who can keep several objects in the air at the same time. But he was presented as the "World's Worst Juggler."

SHIRLEY GRIFFITH: After that he performed as a comedian. Vaudeville comedy acts usually contained a series of disconnected jokes. But during the Great Depression, Fred Allen had the idea of creating a series of complete stories and situations.

Every week, on the radio, he would visit an imaginary place, "Allen's Alley," where he would talk with characters like Senator Claghorn. Senator Claghorn was a politician who talked a lot but never said anything.

But some of Fred Allen's funniest programs were about his supposed longtime dispute with another radio star, Jack Benny.

STEVE EMBER: As a young man, Jack Benny played violin in a vaudeville theater in his home state of Illinois. When the United States entered World War One, he joined the Navy.

He played his violin for other sailors. But the sailors liked his jokes better than his music. So Jack Benny decided to become a comedian.

In the early nineteen thirties Jack Benny got his own radio show. It lasted for twenty-three years.

SHIRLEY GRIFFITH: Listeners loved it when Jack Benny and Fred Allen would say bad things about each other on their shows.

But two comedians could still be friends -- or at least friendly enough to perform together. In nineteen fifty, on Jack Benny's radio program, they did a skit about an early visit to their talent agent.

STEVE EMBER: They are partners in a vaudeville act that they think is wonderful. They hope the agent will get them an appearance in a good theater. But first they have to get past his secretary.

SECRETARY: "Now, uh, what is the name of your act again?"

ALLEN: "Allen and Benny."

SECRETARY: "I thought you said it was Benny and Allen."

ALLEN: " Well, at two o'clock, our billing changes."

SECRETARY: "Well, what kind of an act do you do?"

BENNY: "Violin, clarinet and snappy patter."

SECRETARY: "And where have you played?"

BENNY: "Oh, all over."

SECRETARY: " Well, where?"

ALLEN: "Well, just -- just tell her the important dates, Jack."

SECRETARY: "Yeah, go ahead."

BENNY: "Well, we did a week in Sow Belly, Wyoming. A week in Loose Tooth, Arizona. Three days in Stagnant Water, New Mexico. And we also played the Palace here in New York."

SECRETARY: "Sow Belly, Loose Tooth, Stagnant Water and the Palace! Well, at least you worked your way up."

ALLEN: "No, we played the Palace first."

SHIRLEY GRIFFITH: Finally they see the agent, Mickey Rockford, and appeal to him for a break -- a chance to become stars. But he is not interested. Still, they get him to listen to their act. They remind him that he booked them once before.

BENNY: "Mr. Rockford, I'm Jack Benny. This is Fred Allen."

ALLEN: "That's right, Mr. Rockford. Remember? You booked our act seven years ago."

ROCKFORD: "Oh yes, what business are you in now?"

ALLEN: "Well, we are still in show business."

BENNY: "Yes, and we thought you could book us."

ROCKFORD: "Please, fellows."

ALLEN: "Our new act is sensational. At least give us a chance, Mr. Rockford."

BENNY: " Yes, all we need is one good break, you know."

ROCKFORD: "I gave you a break when I put you in Loew's Flatbush."

ALLEN: "Some break. They opened it with Fink's Mules, and Major Doughty's dogs came out, then Manny's Monkeys, then Powers' Dancing Elephants."

ROCKFORD: "So what?"

ALLEN: "By the time we came out, we looked like the last two passengers on Noah's Ark."

BENNY: "Mr. Rockford, how about listening to our, our new act?"

ROCKFORD: "Oh, all right, if you insist."

BENNY: "Ready? Ready with your clarinet, Fred?"

ALLEN: "Ready."

BENNY: "Okay. One, two. Atta boy, Fred. Oh, Mr. Allen ..."

ALLEN: "What is it, Mr. Benny?"

BENNY: "Oh, Mr. Allen, have you heard that they're making women's bathing suits out of spun glass?"

ALLEN: "Women's bathing suits out of glass? Well, that is worth looking into."

BENNY: "I'll take it, Mr. Allen."

ALLEN: "If you will. [Benny plays the violin.] Uhhhhh. You know, Mr. Benny, I ..."

BENNY: " Yes, Mr. Allen? Oh, pardon me."

ALLEN: "I love music."

BENNY: "So do I. Music once saved my uncle's life."

ALLEN: "How did music save your uncle's life?"

BENNY: "They played the Star Spangled Banner just as he was sitting in the electric chair. Take it, Mr. Allen."

ALLEN: "[Music] I'm interpolating."

BENNY: "You don't have to finish it, you know."

ALLEN: "Oh, Mr. Benny."

BENNY: "Yes, Mr. Allen?"

ALLEN: "I want you to meet my new girl. Her name is Well Enough."

BENNY: "Why do you call your girl Well Enough?"

ALLEN: "Because I want the boys to leave Well Enough alone. How about the finale, Mr. ... ?"

BENNY: "In unison? [Music] Well, Mr. Rockford, what did you think of us?"

ALLEN: "Wait until he gets his head out of the drawer."

STEVE EMBER: At the same time Fred Allen and Jack Benny were making America laugh, so was Bob Hope. Hope entertained people all over the world for seventy years.

In nineteen thirty-seven, Bob Hope began a series of radio programs called the "Woodbury Soap Show." The next year, he started a radio show for the company that made Pepsodent toothpaste. His Tuesday night radio show soon became popular. Bob Hope continued doing radio shows for almost twenty years.

His success in radio led to a long-term relationship with Paramount Pictures, a major film company. The actors in his movies were also the characters on his radio shows.

SHIRLEY GRIFFITH: For fifty years, Bob Hope entertained members of America's armed forces. He took his radio show to military bases from the South Pacific to Greenland.

One time, after World War Two ended, he brought his radio show to soldiers waiting at a base in California to return to civilian life.

BOB HOPE: "And one Air Force colonel got out and bought a farm. Yeah, he'd been in action so long, every morning before the chickens started laying eggs he called them into the chicken coop and briefed them.

"I knew these boys, I knew these boys, would be glad to see me here today. I said, 'Look fellows, here's the kind of clothes you'd be wearing when you get out,' and fifty guys re-enlisted. I saw some of these fellows shopping for clothes in

Hollywood. They are so used to getting stuff from the supply sergeant that the clerk had to throw the suits on the floor before these guys would try them on.

"One soldier had been fighting in the jungles for years. And I don't know if it had affected him or not, but when the clerk handed him a tweed suit to try on he spent three hours searching through the fuzz for snipers."

STEVE EMBER: Bob Hope came to the United States as a child from England with his family. As a young performer, he had a song and dance act with partners for a while. But then he began to perform by himself. He sang and danced well. He also kept people laughing with his jokes which he told very fast.

In the nineteen thirties, in New York, he appeared in Broadway shows. Success on Broadway brought him a part in the movie "The Big Broadcast of 1938."

SHIRLEY GRIFFITH: In that film, he sang a song with Shirley Ross called "Thanks for the Memory." It became his theme song -- the song people think of when they think of Bob Hope.

STEVE EMBER: Our program was written by Jerilyn Watson and produced by Caty Weaver. I'm Steve Ember.

SHIRLEY GRIFFITH: And I'm Shirley Griffith. Archives of programs with transcripts and MP3s are at voaspecialenglish.com. Join us again next week for THIS IS AMERICA in VOA Special English.