There were family shows — married with children — and then there were shows about childless couples, or where the kids were mostly off-mike presences, such as *The Phil Harris–Alice Faye Show*, on which their daughters got lost in the comic shuffle.

*The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show* was pretty much a two-person operation. It wasn’t as comically textured as Jack Benny’s show, lacking the gang of regulars that populated the Benny program and gave it that warm, close-knit feeling. The Burns and Allen show, however charming and witty, didn’t advance the radio comedy form as Benny’s did. Burns and Allen relied largely, often brilliantly, on Gracie’s sublimely inside-out logic, which extended the dizzy-dame cliché with detours into the back roads of her mind that made it seem original, never demeaning. Much of this had to do with the writing, but also, in a subtle way, with George’s gentle, uncritical, affectionate attitude toward Gracie and her endearing daffiness. She was never a ditz like other radio dimwits — *My Friend Irma*, say, on which Marie Wilson played the ultimate dingbat, or Jane Ace, who radiated less sweetness. Burns never put Gracie down; he just heard her out and let us decide what he was thinking as well as what might be pinwheeling through her convoluted brain.

Gracie was different from the usual female flake. For one thing, she came across not as a flighty dope or blond nitwit but as a lovable eccentric. Burns preferred to call her “off-center.” Gracie always arrived at the truth, but in a wacky roundabout way, and in the end she was usually proved correct — and, like Rochester on the Benny show, enjoyed the last laugh. Burns and Allen had been around show business long enough to realize that a character — an act — needed warmth to wear well, and the fact that audiences knew they were happily married in life created a built-in rapport echoed by their lullaby theme song, “Love

Nest.” They had always been reality-based, even in vaudeville, where they were said to be the first comedy team not to appear in costume.

Gracie had a funny, instantly identifiable radio voice, high-pitched and squeaky (too squeaky for radio in the mind of one NBC executive who tried to nix her), yet never shrill, like Portland Hoffa’s, or sing-songy, like Jane Ace’s and Sade Gook’s. It was a countermelody to Burns’s sandpaper baritone; in real life, it was an octave lower. Her singing voice was surprisingly endearing — as well as just plain surprising — in musicals like *Damsel in Distress* and *Honolulu*, where she displayed what a total performer she was, not just a funny voice. Allen did three movies sans Burns — *The Gracie Allen Murder Case, Mr. and Mrs. North*, and *Two Girls and a Sailor*. At Burns’s urging, they made twenty-eight films together, nearly all forgotten — with titles like *College Holiday* and *College Swing*.

When the team first entered radio, Gracie was decidedly the star, and the first offer they had, from Eddie Cantor, was for her to appear alone on his show. Even though they were a popular vaudeville team, Burns took the snub in stride and let her appear solo as Cantor’s foil.

Their debut on Rudy Vallee’s *Fleischmann Hour* quickly followed, but it ate up most of the act — or, as Burns later wrote, nicely summing up the fear of all vaudeville-turned-radio stars: “On one show we’d done about half our act; we still had half an act left and only twenty years to fill.” They were a fast hit, for the same reason that kept them popular until Gracie’s death. In Burns’s summation: “Women understood her. Men thought they were married to her. And everybody knew somebody just like her.” Three months after *The Fleischmann Hour* they had their own show, *The Adventures of Gracie*, playing an unmarried vaudeville team, but it wasn’t a hit until the title and format were changed to *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show* and they portrayed themselves. Although he grew into the role of straight man (in vaudeville, he had been the intended funny one), Burns, after making her the lead, was at first envious of Allen’s greater renown.

In fact, Gracie Allen took little interest in the radio show and could have done it in her sleep. She made few creative contributions beyond her own enchanting personality, and usually didn’t attend rehearsals (her stand-in was Jack Benny’s former girl friend, Mary Kelly), which, according to the writer George Balzer, helped her maintain her guileless
sound. As Burns told Leonard Maltin, "I had the talent off stage, and Gracie had it on the stage. I was able to think of it and Gracie was able to do it. And that's what made us a good team."

Allen's timing was flawless and second nature. "Because Gracie made playing Gracie appear to be so easy, she never received the credit she deserved as an actress," Burns once said. On TV, she never won an Emmy, probably because everyone, including actors who should have known better, assumed she was just playing herself. For Gracie, reading lines into a microphone didn't count as work, and even TV eventually bored her. She didn't believe she was funny, Burns said, but considered herself an actress rather than a comic and never told jokes offstage; her idea of a serious career was shopping.

Yet, like Mary Livingstone, she had serious mike fright and grew to dread the weekly ordeal. For the first year, the couple went on the air without an audience because Gracie considered audiences an invasion of privacy. During their debut season, paper was taped over the glass doors of the studio to keep visitors from peering in. After a while, they tried doing the shows from a 1,000-seat studio at the Willard Hotel arranged to resemble a vaudeville stage, with footlights in front of the mikes to shield Gracie from the audience. Burns claims that the audience was asked not to laugh or applaud their jokes. Gracie hid behind an oversized mike to keep from meeting their eyes.

Despite her acute fear of radio, she didn't flinch from the spotlight and, recounted Burns, "did everything necessary to make her character popular," such as putting her name on a syndicated advice column called "I Always Say—Sez Gracie Allen," and running for president in 1940 against FDR on the Surprise Party ticket, which included a whistle-stop campaign and mock press conferences. It was also partly a device to boost their radio show's sagging ratings after eight soaring years.

A running gag on their program about Gracie's lost brother turned into a national search for the missing man, the sort of stunt that both radio and the country loved. The media picked up on the hunt, other comics joked about it, actress Grace Moore ad-libbed a line about it in a Broadway play, and a congressman even referred to it in a speech. Burns, always quick to exploit a publicity bonus, hired the Burns Detective Agency to look for his brother-in-law, and wherever they toured, Gracie would turn up at a local newspaper to see if her brother had been turned in to the lost-and-found department. It was literally a running gag: She even pursued him on other shows, dropping in to ask if anyone had seen her brother. The joke lasted for years, to the annoyance of Gracie's real brother, George Allen, a San Francisco accountant.

Burns once explained the seeming contradiction between the private Mrs. Burns and the public Gracie: "One of the reasons Gracie was able to do so much publicity is that she never took it personally. She believed it was the character people wanted to interview and photograph, not the actress. As far as she was concerned, that was all part of the act. I still don't believe she ever completely understood that it was the person they were interested in." He observed, "Her ability to create a believable character made everything else work." She also knew where to draw the line, once refusing to pose next to an insane asylum.

As Burns pointed out in interviews, the audience wouldn't allow him to abuse Gracie in any way; he claimed she was the first comedienne to ever dress like a lady. He regarded her with bemused and confused fondness, as many men do their own wives even in more enlightened times, and audiences could identify easily with the fictional relationship. Burns called her "the national symbol of misunderstanding," and the government once even promoted a safety program with the slogan, "Don't be a Gracie Allen."

There was a crucial difference between dumb and Gracie. Burns often said, "Gracie didn't think she was dumb. When she said silly things, you didn't understand she felt sorry for you"—as if you were the stupid one. "She didn't tell a joke; she explained it," as in this classic exchange: "George, do you have any old light bulbs?... "I throw them away, Gracie, why?"... "My sister could use a few"... "What for?"... "She puts them in all her lamps. It's a big saving"... "A big saving?"... "Of course, George. If you put in new bulbs, they just burn out and you have to change them."

As a biographer put it, Burns never became "the long-suffering husband who ultimately loves Gracie in spite of her befuddlement. George loves Gracie because of it. We were never forced to watch George roll his eyes and bemoan his fate," as Goodman Ace did with his own eternally befuddled wife, Jane. "He loved Gracie just the way she was and wouldn't change her." If Burns had returned Gracie's loony remarks
with wise-guy zingers of his own, it wouldn't have worked; it would have upset the delicate comic balance and put too much of a strain on the jokes.

Had they not been married, the act might not have lasted. But there is always an extra layer of interest when a showbiz twosome is a couple in life—fans love to speculate to what extent the fictional relationship reflects the real one. Whatever the truth of their private life, it was never tarnished by gossip, and while Gracie flirted with men on their radio show, Burns never revealed his actual wandering eye. He remained indulgent and forgiving toward his wife, the most loyal and stolid of husbands. We felt that they loved each other and that it wasn't just an act, as in the troubled case of, say, Lucy and Desi.

Even so, their marriage was not quite as idyllic as portrayed. Burns, catnip to women and a ladies' man before marriage, had a series of girl friends afterward but remained faithful in his fashion and made sure never to fall in love. Ever the pragmatic showman, he didn't dare risk breaking up perhaps the most successful husband-and-wife team in show business history. Like many couples of the era, especially entertainers, they had an arrangement: To keep Gracie content, and to assuage his own guilt, Burns would periodically give his wife a lavish gift that was in effect a payoff for her looking the other way. Gracie was known to have once said, whether blithely or bitterly, "I wish Natty [George's real name was Nathan Birnbaum] would find another girl friend. I could use a silver fox jacket."

Originally on the show, Burns and Allen had played an unattached twosome, doing what Burns termed "flirtation routines" as they had in vaudeville. But listeners tired of this after a few years, since it flew in the face of reality, and their ratings dropped. Burns hit on the problem—"Our jokes were too young for us"—and promptly fixed it. From then on, they played their married selves, with kids, living happily ever after in the ratings.

They started out as a team and Burns was meant to be the funny one but, as he recalled, "Even her straight lines got laughs. I knew right away that there was something between the audience and Gracie. They loved her and so, not being a fool and wanting to smoke cigars for the rest of my life, I gave her the jokes." The Burns and Allen show kept the title stars at the center of things. The only other "characters" were announcer Bill Goodwin, a handsome chap who played a ladies' man, plus each week's guest.

Burns hated to leave radio. "I loved being in radio more than any other part of my career.... Radio was that place where performers who couldn't do anything except talk, could talk." But Burns and Allen were even more popular on TV without noticeably altering the old format, though Burns made a major change that broke the fourth wall—stepping out of character and, indeed, in and out of the scene, to address the audience, narrate the plot, and deliver an opening monologue; on one show, George waved to the audience from a dramatic scene. (He liked to claim that he stole the idea from Our Town.)

Burns and Allen on TV remained largely a video version of the couple's radio show, where there had been few surprises and no vapid singers or rowdy bandleaders to spice things up, apart from a Mel Blanc character called the Happy Postman (recycled as long-faced Mr. Beasely on TV). Gracie, however, balked at TV, pleading migraines and a desire to resume her life of lunching and shopping. Despite her film career, she distrusted the camera, but Burns cushioned the move by promising they'd shoot her from various sides and let her choose a favorite angle.

The relaxed, no-sweat nature of both the Jack Benny and Burns and Allen radio shows—as opposed to the boisterous tone of Milton Berle, Jackie Gleason, and most other TV-born comedy shows—worked beautifully in the early years of television, when nobody had any better ideas anyway and TV was either "radio with pictures," as they used to say, or, in the case of the variety shows, videotaped vaudeville or photographed musical revues. You almost didn't have to watch Benny's or Burns's TV shows at all; it was possible to face away from the set and get just about everything.

In the end, though, the couple relied for laughs almost exclusively on Gracie's illogical logic and on Burns's unfailingly good-humored, loving, equally deadpan responses. George's matter-of-fact manner was as quietly funny as Gracie's non sequiturs; her silly piping responses sounded even funnier set against the gravelly Burns's questions and nonplussed responses, as if he were some bystander who had wandered
over to befriend a befuddled but beguiling woman and found he couldn’t get away. It was a deceptively simple but seductive format that remains fresh, effortless, and inspired to this day.

_Somewhere in that same neighborhood resided The Phil Harris–Alice Faye Show_, the most successful spin-off from _The Jack Benny Program_, on which Harris had been the epitome of the wild-and-crazy bandleader. He played a stock radio character, the carousing musician/announcer, who still exists on TV in watered-down fashion (Ed McMahon, Doc Severinsen, Paul Schaffer, Kevin Eubanks, et al.), but who has less to do today than did his radio forefathers—band leaders like Harris and Ray Noble (conductor on _The Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy Show_). His function is essentially the same, though—to gently needle the star while acting as foil and/or whipping boy.

Harris had broken into radio years before Benny’s show, doing a nightly fifteen-minute remote from the Coconut Grove in 1932; it was here that the dashing bachelor conductor later met Alice Faye, then married to Tony Martin. George Burns also met him around that time, and wanted him for his show, but Burns waited too long and Jack Benny got to him first. Harris worked for Benny until 1952; the Harris–Faye show ran until 1954.

A loudmouthing hipster from Nashville, Harris was a pop star in his own right, a singer of such novelty hits as “That’s What I Like About the South,” “The Preacher and the Bear,” and “Some Little Bug.” But his larger-than-life persona couldn’t be contained on the Benny show, so he and his gorgeous, retired movie-star wife, singer and actress Alice Faye, who played an ex–film star on the show, moved up the block from Benny. Their show even followed Benny’s, and occasionally a plot would pick up on their show where it had left off on Benny’s show. So he could make it to his own show in time, Harris usually appeared in the top half of the Benny program.

Phil Harris’s brazen character didn’t work as well on his own show—probably a case of too much of a good thing. Faye was too ladylike, the very thing that made her such a sensual singer in films and on the show, where each week’s plot was interrupted for a ballad by her and a comedy song by Harris; many plots involved their long-suffering sponsor, Rexall, and its riled radio CEO, played by the omnipresent Gale Gordon, yet another example of making the sponsor part of the fun. Harris and Faye brought with them from Benny’s show a character who never appeared there but was constantly referred to—Frankie Remley, an even brassier and boozier musician than Harris. It was left a little unclear whether Remley was a comic creation or a real person—as indeed he was, the guitarist in the Harris orchestra; like other Benny characters, he was half-fictional.

Remley (played by Elliott Lewis) was someone Harris could ridicule and humiliate, but the gzazzling and womanizing macho twosome wore a little thin; the one-joke concept fit more amusingly into a quick three-minute segment on the Benny show. The boorish booze hound was a tried-and-true device that drew instant, easy laughs.

The type finally seems to have exhausted its comic welcome, and become politically incorrect, but Harris was acceptably funny because on the Benny show he only _talked_ about his drinking; he never appeared drunk on either his own or Benny’s show. He stood in stark contrast to the upright, probably teetotaling Benny, whom he irreverently hailed as “Jackson,” provoking Benny’s disdain toward a man he plainly despised as a lush and a lecher, a vulgarian even lower down on the social ladder than himself. In life, Harris was a fairly soft-spoken man, unlike his preening radio persona, who, upon glimpsing himself in a mirror, invariably drewled, “Oh, you _dawwweeeee_!”

The show came most vividly to life when Frankie and Phil (or “Curly,” as Remley called him) encountered the wisecracking streetwise Brooklyn delivery boy, Julius, played by the reliable Walter Tetley as a tougher version of his Leroy role on _The Great Gildersleeve_. Harris recognized Elliott Lewis’s contribution to his show’s success. “Elliott and I were like clockwork,” he once said. “It was so easy—it just used to flow.” Comically, Harris worked much better on the show with Lewis than with his wife. Faye, never much of a comedian, mostly stood by, like a Laurel and Hardy wife, making cracks, but her zingers never carried much sting. The pair weren’t a natural comic fit like Burns and Allen, Jim and Marian Jordan (Fibber McGee and Molly), or Goodman and Jane Ace.

Although it was technically a family show, with allusions to the couple’s daughters Phyllis and Alice Jr., most episodes featured Phil and Frank getting in and out of scrapes; Faye always seemed removed
from the action. Years later, the writer Ray Singer said, “Remley was the backbone of the show—he spoke for us.” Remley in effect became the Phil Harris on the Harris-Faye show—a crude, hard-drinking guy that Harris, now a family man with two young daughters, could no longer play on the air. As a settled-down husband and father, Harris lost some of the comic vinegar on his own show, where he was portrayed as a semiliterate stumbler. The first two writers on the show were fired because their jokes, based on the rakish Benny-show version of Harris, were borderline risqué.

Singer recalled, “The Phil Harris–Alice Faye Show was a writer’s paradise, because Phil was the kind of guy who loved living, and didn’t want to be bothered with work or anything else. He left us alone. We never had to report to him.” Harris and Faye, who lived in Palm Springs, drove in on Fridays to rehearse. The writers would rewrite on Saturday, Harris and Faye would do the show Sunday, and go back to Palm Springs. “He never knew what was gonna happen. And it was left in our hands. It spoiled us for everybody else.”

Of all the comic couples who resided in radio, only The Bickersons dared reveal the down and dirty underbelly of married life. Other couples squabbled, but the Bickersons were out for blood; and unlike many others, they had no children to get in the way of their violent verbal warfare.

The Bickersons were a perfectly matched couple always spoiling for a fight. While in The Honeymooners Ralph and Alice Kramden—obviously inspired by John and Blanche Bickerson—were a struggling blue-collar couple who lived in a wretched Brooklyn flat, the Bickersons were more comfortably middle-class. Both gave as good as they got, they never retreated an inch, and there were no “You’re-the-greatest!” closing clinches; the routines always ended with John’s defeated “Aw-w-w-w, Blanche.” Yet their sketches lacked the emotional texture of those in The Honeymooners or the mellowing influence of an Ed Norton to calm the domestic waters. If the Kramdens had been no more than a caterwauling couple, they would have seemed far less lovable.

Forty years after the couple was first heard as a weekly sketch on The Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy Show, even people who never heard the originals still refer to “The Bickersons,” a phrase now synonymous with spiteful spouses. The name is invoked metaphorically in references to every sort of wrangling twosome, from TV movie critics Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert to political candidates.

The shows were a one-note brawl, a nonstop barrage of rather labored insults said to have been inspired by creator-writer Philip Rapp’s own quarrels with his wife, Mary. “I’ve hidden under a lot of tables in my day,” said Rapp’s son, Joel, who claims his parents often squabbled in public. “My father would scurry off to the typewriter while the dialogue was still fresh,” he recalled. Phil Rapp said that the Bickersons were an antidote to saccharine couples like Ozzie and Harriet and Jim and Betty Anderson on Father Knows Best. “It just made me sick,” he remarked in 1980. “There was so much sweetness. This was not marriage as I knew it.”

Played by suave actor/announcer Don Ameche, John Bickerson was in a permanent state of seething exasperation, while wife Blanche (Frances Langford) alternated between victim and viper. They indulged in a thirty-minute insult-fest more interested in drawing guffaws than in revealing anything amusing about the dark side of wedded bliss; but then marital spats are like that.

Even though their show lasted only two seasons, they remain the generic war-between-the-sexes comedy team, and well into the 1970s Don Ameche was still doing Bickersons-like commercials. Langford, though one of the finer band singers of the 1940s, is destined to go down in show business history as America’s favorite nag; in 1951, Lew Parker played opposite her in a summer version.

Mr. and Mrs. B went at each other like Jiggs and Maggie—loud and venomous, but with less mitigating charm or believability, as in this typical segment from a 1948 show, which began, as always, with Blanche being awakened by John’s snoring:

Blanche: You used to be so considerate. Since you got married to me, you haven’t got any sympathy at all.
John: I have, too. I’ve got everybody’s sympathy.
Blanche: Believe me, there’s better fish in the ocean than the one I caught.
John: There’s better bait, too.
Blanche: I don’t see how you can go to bed without kissing me good night.
John: I can do it.
Blanche: You better say you’re sorry for that, John.
John: I’m the sorriest man who ever was born.

No twosome was more perfectly attuned to middle-class 1930s sensibilities than Fibber McGee and Molly, whose show portrayed an enduring couple at the opposite extreme from the wicked Bickersons. The show, which seamlessly blended vaudeville high jinks with radio’s cozier atmospherics, came along at the right time—a home remedy for a shaken, insecure, Depression-era America that needed reassuring that its values were still intact, alive and well at 79 Wistful Vista.

It was a hard show to dislike, despite—or maybe even because of—its old-fashioned comic devices and broadly drawn characters taken from Jim and Marian Jordan’s vaudeville career and updated by the inspired writer Don Quinn, who drafted the premise, much of the shtick heard on the show, and Fibber McGee and Molly themselves. Quinn, who had written for Hellzapoppin’s Olsen and Johnson, wrote the show on his own for years, not dependent on a revolving door of gagmen, the way most radio comedies were put together.

Fibber McGee was in the long tradition of American braggarts and bumbler’s, the ineffectual husband who shouts and sputters while his wife looks on indulgently. He was originally a teller of tall tales in the tradition of frontier humorists Mark Twain, Josh Billings, and Artemus Ward, but by the 1940s McGee had, like Huck Finn, been “sivilized” by Quinn and was more inept mainstream American male than cracker-barrel yarn spinner. Now he simply exaggerated, dreamed up goofy get-rich-quick schemes, and fumed.

Molly’s sweet nature and amiable kidding of her husband’s bungling ways and corny wit (her aside “‘Tain’t funny, McGee” became a national byword, along with her astonished “Heavenly days, dearie!”) were also in the standard vein of sitcom humor that still prevails, with politically corrected shadings. Even shows as vulgar and as far-removed from Fibber McGee and Molly as TV’s Married... with Children are but crasser, trashier 1990s versions of the McGees—a hapless boob of a husband and his brighter, long-suffering, eye-rolling wife.

The McGees began in 1935 as The Smith Family, once described as a more amusing One Man’s Family, and so it might well have remained had the Jordans not met Quinn. He was a former cartoonist who contrived a show for them called The Smackouts, about a motormouth grocer and his wife who were always “smack out” of everything, necessitating wild fibs and convoluted excuses by Fibber. Henrietta Johnson, the wife of an agency head, was a fan of The Smackouts and called it to her husband’s attention. He wanted to put it on the network for the usual thirteen-week tryout, but the Jordans felt they needed more time to establish their characters and agreed to do the show for a paltry $250 a week if the agency would give them twenty-six weeks.

Fibber and Molly were situated midway in radio demographics between the sophisticated urban/suburban comedy shows of Fred Allen, Jack Benny, Bob Hope, Phil Harris, Burns and Allen, Ozzie and Harriet, and Goodman and Jane Ace and the more small-town humor of Lum and Abner and Vic and Sade. It was easy for people to identify with the goings-on at 79 Wistful Vista, caricatured though they might be. In a sense, it was more of a comic strip than a show, and in the first months the Jordans even dressed in character.

McGee was a frustrated homeowner trying to get through the day but constantly beset by pesky neighbors and petty annoyances, of which the famous cluttered front closet—the most famous running gag in radio—became a hallmark; indeed, it was a microcosm of the show. People too young to have heard Fibber McGee and Molly know all about that closet, with its cascading junk, usually followed by McGee’s muttered vow: “Gotta clean out that hall closet one of these days.” The sound was produced by shoving items down a portable staircase. The closet joke was no accident but a calculated attempt by the Jordans and Quinn to find a running gag to compete with a rival show’s squeaky-spring bit that paid off every week. Over twenty years, it became the most recognizable sound gag in the world, largely because it was transformed into a sight gag in the listener’s mind.

Radio comedy resounded with sound gags of every sort, especially on Fibber McGee—not just sound effects, but bits like McGee’s alliterative outbursts and knee-slapper similes (“Them springs are tighter than a forty-dollar girdle after a spaghetti dinner”), Mayor La Trivia’s sputtering spoonerisms, and the names of recurring characters (Mrs.
Wearybottom, etc.). To this vocal silly symphony was added a cacophony of giggles, fits, muttered oaths (McGee’s “Dad-rat the dad-ratted . . .”), spit-takes, and explosions set off by actors portraying a steady stream of blowhards, wiseacres, and wheezing old-timers, like The Old-timer himself, always one-upping McGee’s tall tales with, “That ain’t the way I heee-e-e-ard it, Johnny—the way I he-e-e-ard it was, ‘One fellow says to t’ other feller, he sa-a-a-a-ys . . .’” McGee was surrounded by characters whose sole purpose was to deflate his every word and deed, people with fanciful Dickensian names like Throckmorton P. Gildersleeve, Doc Gamble, Mayor La Trivia, Wallace Wimple, and Otis Cadwallader.

Jim Jordan didn’t do voices, but Marian Jordan did—best of all the nagging, tee-heeing kid Teeny, who badgered McGee with questions (“Whatcha doin’, mister, huh? Whatcha doin’, huh?, huh?”) and endlessly repeated “I betcha”s, capturing the essence of a pestering little girl. Teeny wasn’t a brat, but McGee wanted to brain her, because she saw through his boasts, ploys, and ego.

McGee’s main bit, usually opposite Gale Gordon (as Otis Cadwallader), was confused alliteration, such as “Don’t call me a phalanx, you soggy, sap-headed serum salesman!” Or, more elaborately, “I was the top tin can designer for the Town Talk Tuna Company. I turned out tuna tins by the ton. I had a type of tin in two tones of tan that was the talk of the tuna trade, but one tan turned tones too tawny, so I had to tone down the tawny tan . . .” That might not bring down the house now, but in the context of the show, the character, and perhaps the times, it produced a surefire payoff; part of the joke was simply to see how long McGee could extend the alliteration or rapidly recite it.

Radio comedy was a verbal steeplechase. Quinn was able to work another switch on his alliteration skills by having fat-headed, blustering La Trivia get snarled up in a sentence, such as: “Why, yes, Mrs. McGee, I suppose you would call a part-harm, petrol-packing possum—that is, a pot-farmed, possum-pinking partridge!”—only to give up and stomp out to applause.

_Fibber McGee and Molly_ spawned radio’s first successful spin-off, _The Great Gildersleeve_, and later hatched a second hit, _Beulah_—not to mention singer Perry Como and a wacky drummer in the Billy Mills Orchestra named Spike Jones. Gildersleeve could outbluster even McGee. The program wasn’t big enough for the two of them, but it was an amiable paring and the new show went on to a long life on its own, starring Harold Peary, who originated the character of George Gildersleeve, who owned a girdle factory.

Much of the comedy on _Fibber McGee and Molly_, as on many of the more primitive sitcoms, was simple insult humor, a harmless volley of verbal blows with the gloves on. The radio historian Jim Harmon tellingly noted, “Fibber could only let out his full aggressiveness against Gildersleeve. Partly it was the ‘you old horse thief’ kind of masculine humor that says in effect: We are such good friends, I can say anything to you without you becoming permanently offended. But there was a strain of real hostility, too.”

When TV arrived, the Jordans resisted the temptation. “They were trying to push us into TV and we were reluctant,” Jim Jordan said later. “Our friends advised us, ‘Don’t do it until you need to. You have this value in radio—milk it dry.’ We never made the change, because Marian had a heart attack.” They wound up their career in fifteen-minute sketches on _Monitor_—“Just Molly and Me”—and were set to sign for three more years when Marian Jordan died.

The show’s lasting charm, however, was in the unspoken but enduring affection Fibber and Molly seemed to feel toward each other despite his stubborn fulminations and her skeptical Irish nature. (Hal Peary said, “They were as homey in person as they sounded.”) Molly forgave McGee his every illusion and self-delusion, waiting for “Himself” to calm down and admit what a jerk he’d been. Surpassing all the other husband-and-wife comedy teams, perhaps including even George Burns and Gracie Allen, _Fibber McGee and Molly_ were radio’s most identifiably loving couple.

It goes without saying that most of radio’s comedy shows were rampantly sexist—a procession of dumb Doras, nice Nellies, and battling Berthas—but then so were the times. It’s difficult to find any character type of any gender, age, nationality, religion, or color that was not a comic stereotype—white males included, usually portrayed (as they still are, never out of fashion) as bumbling, patronizing husbands and fathers, stuffed shirts, mama’s boys, or macho jerks. So it’s a useless exercise to indict this character or that show. Easier, wiser, and fairer
is to write the stereotypes off to lazy writing and leftover vaudeville attitudes.

In radio, and later in TV, every comic female was either miserable, crazy, or unable to function without a man. Then, once a woman snagged a guy, she made his life miserable and crazy. Nearly all the comedy writers were, of course, men, who reflected the prevailing attitudes and platitudes of the day, magnified for laughs. Nobody seemed to object much, or really even to notice.

Women were the most hopelessly stereotyped—even more so, in a sense, than blacks—simply because women were the most visible minority on the air during that era; blacks barely existed. There was almost a formula, a sort of First Law of Sitcoms, that if a comedy involved only a couple, almost invariably the woman was a dodo. If, however, there were children, then the woman was suddenly imbued with brains and wisdom and the man became the dummy. Many of the most beloved major female comic characters (with the clear exception of Baby Snooks) were adorably ding-a-ling, from the addled Gracie Allen, Portland Hoffa, and Jane Ace to Marie Wilson’s Irma Peterson on My Friend Irma and Effie Klinker, the old-maid puppet on the Charlie McCarthy show, in constant pursuit of a man.

Other archetypal fictional heavy-breathing women were Vera Vague (Barbara Jo Allen), a recurring man-hunter on the Bob Hope and Jimmy Durante shows, and the saucy Southern belle Leila Ransom (Mary Jane Croft), whose life was devoted to ensnaring would-be lothario Throckmorton P. Gildersleeve.

Shirley Mitchell played dingbats of every sort—characters like Alice Darling, a ditsy Rosie the Riveter who was Rudy Vallee’s sweetheart, comic Joan Davis’s pretty foil on TV’s Joan Davis Show, and even Amos’s wife on Amos ’n’ Andy—one of several white performers in early radio who doubled in black roles. It never occurred to Mitchell that those characters were featherbrains. “It was work. We never thought about the intent,” she says. “We weren’t that aware, as people are now. I never resented playing a bimbo. What I played didn’t bother me—and it still doesn’t! The bottom line was, it was a good job.”

Only a handful of female comic creations rose above stereotype. There was Mary Livingstone, who showed no interest in her asexual radio beau, Jack Benny, and razzed him unmercifully. Most liberated of all was Eve Arden’s Miss Brooks, who remained mildly interested in the dim bulb Mr. Boynton, mainly because he kept hanging around. The few well-matched and companionable pairs included Fibber McGee and Molly, Vic and Sade, and the sensible Ethel and Albert, the most normal of all radio couples.

Jane Ace, queen of the malaprops on Easy Aces, was a linguistic first cousin to Gracie Allen, whom she predated by a few years. She also shared Gracie’s fear of microphones so that one had to be built into the card table the couple sat at during their broadcasts. Jane Ace had a lazier, flatter, and more ruminative voice than Gracie Allen, often lapsing into a monotonous, almost whiny cadence. Gracie never mangled a phrase—it was her logic that was so brilliantly twisted.

John Crosby wrote of Jane Ace: “She is a woman of sunny amiability who takes an extremely literal and subjective view of everything around her. That makes things very easy for her and extremely difficult for anyone else. There are a lot of Mrs. Malaprops in radio, but none of them scrambles a cliché quite so skillfully as Jane . . . and she got there ahead of most of them.” Besides the malapropisms, Jane’s scrambled thoughts resulted in dipsy-doodle lines: “I’ll say he’s not guilty, whoever he is. If he’s nice enough to pay me three dollars a day to be his jury, the least I can do is recuperate, doesn’t it to you?” Asked by a friend what she’s been doing, she says, “Just fine, thanks.”

Jane (Epstein) was the invention of her husband, Goodman Ace, who created and wrote the show and played opposite her during its fifteen-year run, humoring his wife’s funny if at times labored and unlikely mispronunciations with good-natured asides, often groaning in a fond, faintly patronizing way, “Isn’t that aw-w-ful?” Ace good-humoredly tolerated his wife’s private Janeisms. When asked how Mrs. Ace was, he liked to reply, “Fine, if you like Jane.” Millions seemed to.

Easy Aces began in Kansas City in 1930, an offshoot of a show that Ace did on a local station reviewing movies and theater at ten dollars a show. He was then a critic for a local paper who had begun in radio reading comic strips on the air, à la Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia during a New York newspaper strike. By then, he had also begun selling jokes to
Jack Benny, whom he met in his critic’s job. When columnist Heywood Broun’s network show failed to come on one night, Ace ad-libbed with his new wife for fifteen minutes and, Easy Aces lore has it, they charmed listeners with their chatter about a recent local murder and the couple’s addiction to bridge, then a national craze. The title of the show-to-be was thus a double play on words.

That show established the conversational format similar to that of Vic and Sade—with occasional drop-in characters, such as their good friend Marge (Mary Hunter), whose common sense and affection for Jane gave the show much of its warmth. Marge, who chuckled heartily at Jane’s lines, acted as a sort of early laugh track, one writer noted. In its early days, the lack of music (apart from the show’s theme, “Manhattan Serenade”) and sparse sound effects made it seem as if you had put your ear to the wall and were listening to people yakking away in the next apartment. It all sounded far more lifelike than the similar but more sketch-oriented Burns and Allen scenes.

Easy Aces had frequent bright moments, which explain Ace’s reputation as a comic guru who later ran a highly regarded comedy writing workshop at CBS and for years wrote a column in The Saturday Review. He later wrote for TV’s Kraft Music Hall with Perry Como (earning $10,000 a week and making him TV’s highest paid writer), whose nonchalant on-air manner was largely Ace’s doing. “Goody gave Perry a tone,” said TV producer Lester Gottlieb. “It was an established fact that, man for man, Goody Ace was the best guy you could get to work on a comedy-variety show.” Ace, considered the comic equal of cronies Groucho Marx, Jack Benny, and Fred Allen, wound up as a commentator on NPR’s All Things Considered.

The Easy Aces shows were simply laid out and nonchalantly paced, often formulaic, but word mavens delighted in Ace’s ability to play with the language. “Urbane” was the word most often used to describe their show, wrote Ace’s nephew Mark Singer in The New Yorker. His primary comic device was putting droll, double-edged malapropisms in his wife’s mouth, several per show, like these jewels: “I must have the intentional flu,” “He’s a big clog in the machinery,” “Long face, no see,” “A fly in the oatmeal,” “I’m a human domino,” “She had a face that would stop a crook,” “Mother, you’re so pessimistic—why can’t you be more of an optician?” “Make it short and sappy,” and Mrs. Ace’s standard: “You have to take the bitter with the batter.” At least one phrase, “Time wounds all heels,” made it into Bartlett’s.

After the show’s initial run, Ace tried to remake the show in 1948 as a half-hour program called Mr. Ace and Jane, about an ad man who lived next to a radio announcer. The new version allowed Ace, a long-time ad-baiter, who once lost a sponsor when he zinged Anacin’s switch from tin to cardboard boxes, to bite his favorite hand. Not surprisingly, the revived program only lasted a year. As Jane might say, it was all harmful fun at the time.

If Easy Aces patronized its female lead, it sounded like a feminist tract next to My Friend Irma, which starred Marie Wilson as radio’s preeminent dumb Dora. Wilson, in real life a curvy blond sexpot, spoke in a voice that sounded as if she had a permanent head cold, portraying a sweet, vacant dame—a characterization so terminally sexist that the show is almost unthinkable now. Wilson played Irma Peterson, a naive, childlike ingénue; Cathy Lewis, the “My” of My Friend Irma, played her smart, patient, long-suffering roommate Jane Stacy, whose life was devoted to getting her dim friend out of trouble. Irma’s boyfriend, Al (John Brown), was a luckless gambler reminiscent of Nathan Detroit. Gloria Gordon was the girls’ motherly Irish landlady, Mrs. O’Reilly, and Professor Kropotkin was played by Hans Conried, who had a lucrative career in radio, movies, TV, and on stage playing an array of vaguely European short-tempered characters—“stack blowers,” as they were called in the trade.

What drew men to the show was Wilson’s sexy nasal voice and the sparkly-sounding Lewis, later played by Diana Lynn in the inevitable film version, now better remembered, if at all, as the movie that introduced Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis.

My Friend Irma was state-of-the-art dumb blonde, but the other reigning radio female caricature was the wife/girlfriend/mom as shrew. To this was added a million mother-in-law jokes that infested the airwaves, memorably embodied by the Kingfish’s dreaded mama-in-law on Amos ‘n’ Andy, Wallace Wimple’s “big ol’ wife, Sweetie Face” on Fibber McGee and Molly, and that ace battleax Blanche Bickerson. Say
what you will about Sapphire, Sweetie Face, and Blanche, they weren’t your usual numbskull radio wives.

**Falling somewhere between** the beleaguered Blanche and the bewildered Irma was the Liz Cooper character on *My Favorite Husband*, the forerunner of *I Love Lucy*. It was a sort of “I Love Lizzy,” costarring Lucille Ball and Richard Denning as Liz and George Cooper, your basic Average American Couple from Minneapolis.

When the show moved to TV, Liz was played by the comedic if far less comical Joan Caulfield, opposite Barry Nelson, but it lasted only a few seasons before being quickly superseded in 1951 by a zesty little item called *I Love Lucy*, an instant and constant hit featuring Ball and her real favorite husband, Desi Arnaz.

Ball and Arnaz wisely took with them to TV their *My Favorite Husband* team—writers Bob Carroll, Jr., and Madelyn Pugh and producer Jess Oppenheimer—but Lucy’s comic DNA can be traced back even further: *My Favorite Husband* was inspired by a novel called *Mr. and Mrs. Cugat*, about a Latin bandleader and his kooky wife. (Xavier Cugat, then married to Abbe Lane, sued the show, which quickly changed the couple’s name from Cugat to Cooper.)

*My Favorite Husband* (1948–52) had many of the basic elements of *Lucy*: Ball portrayed what would be her later TV self—a frantic, endearingly spacy wife trying to compete with her husband, though on the radio show he was an obliging banker. Going back to the early 1930s, Ball had played a series of comic redhead bombshells in movies opposite Bob Hope and others and was an early Charlie McCarthy female foil.

Desi’s TV presence spiced up the radio concept (he wouldn’t have made a terribly credible banker), not just giving the show some Latin heat but adding a crucial ingredient that utilized rather than fought against his real persona. Casting Desi as a Cuban bandleader fending off his wife’s showbiz ambitions went back to the original book about the Cugats. Somehow the concept had been overlooked by bandleader Ozzie Nelson and Harriet Hilliard, his real-life band-singing wife, who was revamped on radio as an obedient hausfrau.

The Coopers’ good friends, George’s grumpy boss and his wife, the Atterburys, were forerunners of Fred and Ethel Mertz. They were played by Gale Gordon and Bea Benaderet, who were set to repeat their roles on TV, but Gordon was bound to *Our Miss Brooks* and Benaderet to Burns and Allen. In a typical episode that would be right at home on *I Love Lucy*, Liz and Mrs. Atterbury want to play on their husbands’ office softball team over the men’s objections to such a foolish notion; the little woman’s place is in the home, obviously. In her most classic *Lucy* mode, Ball whimpers and weeps and carries on until the men agree to let them play. The wives, totally ignorant of the game (naturally), read a book on baseball and get advice from an expert, make the squad, and mess up the game. Liz inadvertently saves the day by being hit on the head by a pitched ball that sends the winning run home and shows up the men—by a fluke, interestingly, not by any innate ability.

Ball’s Liz Cooper is a less loopy Lucy, but the radio show became a kind of out-of-town tryout for the TV smash. When Ball was asked to adapt the show to TV, she said, “Only if Desi plays my husband.” It was Lucy’s ploy to keep the traveling bandleader with the wandering eye at home, over protests from TV executives worried about a sitcom featuring a Cuban husband. During the summer, the couple took the concept on the road, in an act that included husband-and-wife sketches, to see how it played. It proved such a hit that the following fall, the pilot for *I Love Lucy* was shot during Ball’s last year of *My Favorite Husband*.

What few listeners have any reason to remember is that, in a unique reversal of the usual chronology, *I Love Lucy* had a brief run on radio in the 1952 season, with the same cast, characters, and concept as the TV show that had premiered the previous fall. Like other shows that overlapped for a season or two on radio and TV, *Lucy* was hedging its bets in the scary new world of video; six of the *My Favorite Husband* scripts later turned up as *Lucy* TV episodes. (It’s hard to find an early TV show without radio roots, including *My Little Margie* and *Howdy Doody*, considered a total TV creature.)

Jess Oppenheimer related in his memoirs how he tried to animate Ball on radio: “Lucy was relatively stiff working in front of an audience. She just didn’t have the wildly antic quality that I was looking for. I had been trying for weeks to get her and Dick Denning to loosen up and act out the jokes and reactions . . . instead of just standing there waiting to read the next line when the laugh subsided. I knew how
effective this could be from watching Jack Benny do his radio program. I remember telling Lucy, ‘Let go. Act it out. Take your time.’ But she was simply afraid to try.” He gave her tickets to Benny’s show, and “instantly she got the idea, starting to ham it up behind the mike much more broadly than before. There were times I thought we’d have to catch her with a butterfly net to get her back to the microphone. The audience roared their approval and Lucy loved it.” It was the birth of Lucy Ricardo.

PEG LYNCH’S INSIGHTFUL and realistic Ethel and Albert, with Lynch and Alan Bunce, was a real leap forward in domestic comedy—a light-hearted, clever, well-observed, daily fifteen-minute show about the amiable travails of a recognizable suburban couple, the Arbuckles, of Sandy Harbor and, only occasionally, their little girl, Susy; the first Albert was Richard Widmark. The sitcom, which ran from 1944 to 1950, even managed a rare successful transfer to TV in 1951. While the show is little remembered today, it was a skillfully written series that bridged the domestic comedy of a vaudeville-based era with a keen modern sensibility. Lynch made her comic points without stooping to female stereotypes, insults, running gags, funny voices, or goofy plots.

“I realized that I didn’t have to sit down and knock myself out every minute to try to think of something funny,” she told Leonard Maltin. “All I had to do was look around me.” Lynch had the underrated knack of taking the small irritations and minutiae of home life and shaping them into a wry comment on domestic life without stretching the facts, much as Jean Kerr and Erma Bombeck later did in print. Ethel and Albert sounded like the couple next door (as their show was called in a second radio version in 1958); he was irritable but loving, and she was a worrywart but bright and capable. Jerry Seinfeld, in defending the position that his show was about “nothing,” said, “The little things are the big things. That’s the secret of this show.” Similarly, Peg Lynch’s nothings added up to something gently amusing, smart, charming, and recognizably human.