Fred Allen was the David Letterman of radio: caustic, flip, hip, antinetwork, antiavertising, antiratings, and disdainful of all show business cant and custom. During the 1930s and 1940s, he ridiculed audiences and rivals, gleefully took on the media, and became the most self-referential comedian of his time. Unlike Letterman, however, Allen wasn’t just in it for the laughs. Although he tried to play by the rules of radio, Allen was an engaged and committed satirist laced with outrage and a bleak outlook. When Allen entered radio in 1932, his show had a brash, bright, fizzy new sound, a peculiar mix of verbal comedy and topical wit that had never been heard before.

The show’s form was vaudevillian in style—often, as on his famous “Allen’s Alley,” populated by stock comic types—but its content was acerbic and geared to radio, mocking politicians, news events, advertising, movies, and radio itself, all the hallowed institutions of the day. Allen, alone among his contemporaries, was considered an intellectual, a comic radio radical, a sort of National Lampoon of the airwaves.

A CBS executive said, after auditioning Allen in 1929, that he would “never do for radio.” He seemed at first too bizarre and savvy for so homey, often corny, a medium. Much of his satire was aimed both at radio’s on-air conventions and off-air constraints. Before it became de rigueur, he took generous and regular swipes at mawkish soap operas, treacly kiddie shows, noisy quiz programs, talentless amateur hours, insipid husband-and-wife chatfests, banal interviewers, and mindless commercials. But he saved his most savage attacks for radio’s fearful vice-presidents and agency men and their hack mentality, which gave him so much grief. He skewered them in such sketches as one about a lowly gag writer named Gulliver Scribble and a failing comedian, Kenny Dank, who tries desperate ploys to raise his ratings from −2.2. One of Scribble’s proudest “gems”—“My sister married an Irishman.”

“Oh, really?” “No, O’Reilly”—runs into trouble with the censor, the ad agency, and a test audience, none of whom like or get the joke.

Bob Hope also was famous for his topical humor, but Hope was always more interested in being a patriot than an incisive social commentator like Allen, radio’s truest satirical gadfly. Some of his shows were cut off the air before they were finished—often because they simply ran overtime, but occasionally because his cracks about NBC executives cut too close to the bone. Allen never understood why shows had to end precisely on time, and once when they cut him off the air in the middle of a sketch, he returned the next week with the end of the sketch and this explanation: “Well, there’s a little man in the company we work for. He’s a vice-president in charge of program ends. When our program runs overtime, he marks down how much time is saved. He adds it all up. Ten seconds here, twenty seconds there, and when the vice-president has saved up enough seconds, minutes, and hours to make two weeks, he uses the two weeks of our time for his vacation.” Allen was not a man easily cowed.

This was a long way from Fibber McGee and Molly. Even so, much of Allen’s satire now sounds tame, due to its topical nature. A brilliantly cutting joke about the NRA has lost its sharpness today; what made Allen so daring in 1938 is what dates him in 1998. The most vital radio comedians fifty years later are the character comics (Jack Benny, Gracie Allen) or the comic characters of Amos ‘n’ Andy, The Great Gildersleeve, and Lum and Abner. Even so, much of Allen’s stuff is still on target, like the time he mocked radio stations’ habit of nervously identifying themselves every few minutes: “If they did that in theaters, people would burn up,” he said. “Imagine a man coming out every half hour during Hamlet and saying to the audience, ‘This is the St. James Theatre on 44th Street. You are listening to Maurice Evans and Kathrynn Locke. We return you now to the Gloomy Dane.’ ”

Allen’s breezy scripts elevated banter into incisive commentary, like another crack about network vice-presidents, whom he dubbed “molehill men.” “A molehill man,” he said, “comes in at 9 A.M. and finds a molehill on his desk and his job is to turn it into a mountain by five o’clock.” Network and advertising executives made his life miserable, but Allen got prime material out of his mythic squabbles with them. Radio was run by ad-agency vice-presidents suddenly anointed impre-
sarios. When one agency man asked him to change a script, Allen exploded in a memo: “You no-good bald-headed sonofa bitch, where were you when page 14 was white?”

Sylvester (Pat) Weaver was the lone exception to Allen’s antipathy to radio executives. Weaver, who later launched television’s Today and Tonight shows, was assigned to the Allen show, which he approached with trepidation, only to discover that in person “Allen didn’t look or act like the ogre he was supposed to be. He was a man of medium height, frowning eyes, and a slightly rumpled pompadour. He made a lot of irreverent remarks to his cast and crew but they were always funny. Several were mildly sarcastic, but I saw no indication of the slightest bit of cruelty. No one seemed to be afraid of him.”

Yet the dour Allen remained an outsider with an outsider’s nervy instincts. He was such an influential innovator that thirty years later, Johnny Carson was whipping his stuff—specifically, “The Mighty Allen Art Players,” which Carson revived as “The Mighty Carson Art Players.” Carson also stole Red Skelton’s pickled pitchman for Guzzler’s Gin, which originated as a sketch on Allen’s show and was first stolen by Skelton.

Fellow comics and wits James Thurber, S. J. Perelman, Robert Benchley, Groucho Marx, and H. Allen Smith respected Fred Allen’s high professional standards, satirical skills, and unique ability to create shows that carried some sting. Groucho Marx wrote a gushing fan letter: “Beyond a shadow of a doubt you are America’s Voltaire, England’s Ring Lardner, and Spain’s Heinrich Heine.” Thurber said of him, “You can count on the thumb of one hand the American who is at once a comedian, a humorist, a wit, and a satirist, and his name is Fred Allen.”

To mollify network VPs and also to ease the sting, Allen framed his cutting commentary on such sacred subjects as Mother’s Day, unions, the FBI, J. Edgar Hoover, the Marshall Plan, FDR, and the WPA within a homespun setting that made his scathing social satire accessible to a general audience. As a workaday vaudevillian, Allen was used to pleasing a wide audience, one city at a time, and learned to tailor his satire to suit the public. That fine balancing act cost him many nights’ sleep in fights with network executives who didn’t get his intellectual digs and often assumed they must be risqué. Despite an incisive comic intelli-
gence, however, Allen couldn’t resist slapstick wordplay. When Portland Hoffa, his wife and foil, would ask, “Shall we go?” Allen would respond, “As the little boy’s lips said to the bubble gum—the time has come to blow,” a typical segue as the pair headed up “Allen’s Alley.” He had a great ear for patois, clichés, and dialects, together with a pronounced weakness for excruciating puns, strained alliteration, and wacky similes that harken back to an earlier tradition of frontier humor built on exaggeration and word cartoons, such as Senator Claghorn’s “Stand aside, son! Ah’m busier than a flute player’s upper lip durin’ a rendition of William Tell.” Other Allenisms: “His hat was so tight he had to butter his ears to put his hat on”... “They were as quiet as a small boy banging two pussywillows together in a vacuum”... “A worm is a nudist caterpillar.” He once asked a character, “Have you got vertigo?” and the man replied, “Only two blocks.”

Nonetheless, several of his better cracker-barrel wisecracks hold up now (“The scarecrow scared the crows so badly they brought back corn they had stolen two years earlier,” or his description of eagles as “Tenth Avenue canaries”), and a few have become classics. It was Allen who first made the joke, stolen by nearly every comic in America, about starting a fire by rubbing two Boy Scouts together, and who originally addressed an ad lib to a bald bass player, “How much would you charge to haunt a house?” His definitive line about Hollywood is still quoted: “You can take all the sincerity in Hollywood, put it in a flea’s navel, and have room left over for three caraway seeds and an agent’s heart.” “Agents,” he once said, “get 10 percent of everything except my blinding headaches.”

But a lot of the lines sound labored today—“He was the first grocer to put bifocal cellophone on apple pie so that nearsighted customers could see what the lower crust looks like”—and a few make you wince, such as his Asian sleuth in a Charlie Chan parody, “Detective One Long Pan,” who spoke in stock pidgin-Chinese, “Prease bling me my dusty lewolver.” The widow of Chan’s creator, Earl Derr Biggers, tried to sue Allen. Once, in a make-believe commercial about a skin-whitening cream, he used a drawling black man for the “before” voice, followed by a Scandinavian voice endorsing the product.

So although he is remembered as a daring satirist, much of Allen’s material was safe, traditional, broad, and strained, notably his reliance
on silly names like Pincus Quagmire, Lotta Spunk, Judge Nullen Void, Dr. Rancid Squirm, Eustace Gwelf, and Urguhardt Pollen; it was a burlesque habit he never broke. Two running characters were Socrates Mulligan and Falstaff Ospenshaw, a Bowery bard who spoke in shaggy verse. Allen was addicted to verbal cartwheels, such as the spoonerisms spun out by Roy Atwell (“Rends, Fromans, and Countymen, end me your fears”).

Like his cronies, he traded heavily in what the critic John Crosby termed “the automatic joke,” which dwelled ad nauseam on Jimmy Durante’s nose, Bing Crosby’s wealth, Bob Hope’s golf and womanizing, Jack Benny’s parsimony, Eddie Cantor’s daughters, etc. It was an early instance of a showbiz syndrome that still infects late-night TV—trotting out guests for courtesy calls, incestuous cross-pollinating plugathons—but he tried to fit celebrities into the show rather than build the show around the guest. He was the first to use guest stars like Orson Welles creatively. On a 1940s show, he and Welles did an inspired five-minute version of Les Misérables (four decades before Tom Stoppard’s Five-Minute Hamlet), in which Welles has all the lines as Jean Valjean and Allen’s Javert is reduced to knocking on doors and blowing a police whistle.

It was considered an honor to be asked to appear on Allen’s show, even at a lower fee than bigger shows were paying. Leo Durocher was cast in an Allen version of Pinafore, Charles Laughton played a soap opera scene, Helen Traubel sang a jingle, Rodgers and Hammerstein were plaintiffs in a courtroom drama, Bea Lillie belted out an aria from Rigoletto, Met tenor Lauritz Melchior did some gospel, and Shakespearean actor Maurice Evans warbled “Ragtime Cowboy Joe.” Regularly, Allen parodied a prestigious University of Chicago Round Table program.

Few outside radio realized it, but Allen was less comedian than writer, despite his vaudeville years as a juggler-cum-comic, like W. C. Fields. Allen’s Dickensian youth was not dissimilar to Fields’s—broken home, alcoholic father, hand-to-mouth struggles—and bred the cynical worldview that gave his humor its edge; an early surefire Allen joke was, “Let X equal the signature of my father.”

By the time Allen got into radio he was thirty-eight and had developed confidence in his own comic sense, plus a well-defined worldview, unlike many aging vaudevillians busily looking over their shoulder at their stage pasts. He wasn’t a clown, but his querulous voice was made for radio, with a whining laugh and whine as recognizable as W. C. Fields’s. It imparted a dry, deadpan topspin to lines, even when they weren’t that funny—a sardonic singsong twang that made them sound amusing and persuaded his first sponsor to hire “the man with the flat voice.” Allen’s haggard pickle-puss face was wasted on radio, and never stood a chance on TV, but somehow his voice implied how he looked.

His first program, The Limit Bath Club Revue (Limit was a bathing lotion), was a dark horse when it debuted in 1932 but became the season’s upset winner. The early shows were performed in a void, sans audience, which suited Allen just fine, enabling him to control the lines and timing, much as a humorist does on paper. Like Jack Benny, he came at radio with both trepidation and respect, perceiving that it was as different from vaudeville as talkies were from silents. The two comics were also similar in their respect for the home audience, their keen intelligence and editing instincts—and, most of all, for their willingness to let others on the show get the laughs. Benny, however, was the butt of the jokes, while Allen rarely was. He seemed to be above the banter even as he was engaged in it, more observer than participant; the person who made the most fun of Allen was Jack Benny. Interestingly, four of radio’s major comedy stars—Jack Benny, George Burns, Edgar Bergen, and Fred Allen—were straight men. Allen could deliver a funny line flawlessly, but most of his dialogue consisted of such “hilarious” cracks as, “You don’t say?” “Is that right?” and “Yes, I suppose it is.”

Other radio comics were in awe of him, especially those in his own radio rep company. He worked everyone hard, as he did himself, holing up all week to bat out scripts before going to an all-night deli on Sixth Avenue to thrash them out with his writers, often tumbling into bed at 4 A.M.: He earned those famous eye pouches. Yet despite the all-night sessions, Allen was considered a generous boss. He gave announcer Kenny Delmar the rights to the Senator Claghorn character that Delmar played but which Allen had created (recycling an earlier blowhard, Senator Bloat).

When Allen began in radio he earned a paltry thousand dollars a week, which included the salaries for his supporting cast. In those early
shows, Allen tried to bend radio to his purposes and to establish it as a branch of theater, both to make the show more accessible to new listeners and to create the musical revue of the air he had in mind. He may have been radio’s first, maybe only, true auteur comic.

By his second show, Allen had established his smartness credentials with a send-up of Eugene O’Neill called “Slice Yourself a Piece of Life,” presented by the Drooping Walrus Dramatic Players. As in his earlier Broadway revues, Allen’s shows assumed a level of literacy by the audience, including parodies of Lysistrata and Sherlock Holmes. Critics quickly recognized a new voice and style, several cuts above other variety programs. Even in his twenties he had been considered a comic’s comic, and often doctored others’ acts. The producer of The Lunt Bath Club Revue later recalled, “After six weeks, everyone was talking about Fred Allen.”

Arnold Auerbach, an Allen writer, remembered Allen at work in an undone bowtie and shirt sleeves, glasses down on his nose, and a wad of Tuck’s five-cent chaw in his cheek. With an eyeshade and arm garters, he reminded Auerbach of a cantankerous small-town newspaper editor. A Broadway columnist remarked that Allen wore expensive clothes that looked rumpled because he crammed his pockets with notes and news items. But despite the seeming jumble, Allen had a system, a kind of early pocket organizer, scribbling ideas as they came to him on a folio made up of carefully creased sheets of paper folded into squares, like an old reporter’s makeshift notebook.

In a letter to a friend (written in his peculiar lower-case newsman’s style), Allen provided a revealing peek into the frantic scene necessitated by getting a live comedy program on the air—and off—in time: “after the two days spent writing them and two days rehearsing and cutting and consulting with the bosses about what is what, you don’t feel so funny when it gets around to nine o’clock on Friday night, for every second counts and we try to cram so much stuff into the half hour that we can’t let down for a second. you should be around some night just before the broadcast when we are trying to take out 45 seconds. the guy with the stopwatch and i are cutting out odd words. by the time you get to the mike you’re afraid to unbend or change a word lest the thing run over . . .” If time got tight, Allen often cut his own lines to preserve the “Alley” residents’ jokes, endearing himself to the cast.

He held a low opinion of most comedy shows, confiding to a colleague, “i wonder what thoughts are rampant in the minds of the morons who bark the same jokes over the networks week after week. the only way i can figure it out is that the listeners have the same mentality and do not discriminate . . .”

Studio audiences were a necessary evil to Allen, who traced the people who flocked to radio shows to “a slow leak in Iowa.” He felt that they falsely inflated a program’s mirth quotient. Even so, he enjoyed talking to people one-on-one during strolls through the crowd for mock quiz-show segments, or in his “People You Didn’t Expect to Meet” spot, chatting with folks in odd jobs. He liked people, just not en masse, though strangers cowered before his devastating ad libs. He didn’t zing guests, like Groucho, but his repartee intimidated housewives and visiting firemen.

What he craved was intimacy, which he felt a large live audience squelched, once remarking, “It seemed to me that this alleged entertainment should be geared down to the tempo of life in the home. If a visitor banged into your living room and carried on his conversation yelling and hawking his points, in the manner and at a tempo employed by most radio comedians, you would hasten his departure.” Allen resisted all attempts to dumb himself down to audiences, fearing that “pretty soon i will be one of those captain andy fellows calling everybody ‘folks.’ ” In one testy outburst, he lashed out: “The worst thing that ever happened to radio was the studio audience. We should never have made the change. somebody like eddie cantor brought these hordes of cackling geese in because he couldn’t work without a bunch of imbeciles laughing at his jokes. Would anybody with a brain be caught dead in a studio audience? Would anybody with a sense of taste stand in line to watch half a dozen people in business suits standing around reading into microphones?”

Allen didn’t disdain all audiences, just noisy ones, but he in some respects was working at cross-purposes with the medium, because the louder audiences howled, the more sponsors and network liked it, figuring that the more raucous the audience, the funnier the show must be. Then as now, studio audiences were primed to laugh by cheerleading announcers or studio aides who begged crowds to howl. Audiences became live laugh machines, set to giggle on cue, just as they do now at
TV sitcoms. Studio audiences rankled him because their responses couldn’t be controlled, forcing shows to run over. He was more interested in reaching what he felt was a more discriminating crowd—the silent majority at home he couldn’t see. And he found them, despite sponsors who worried he was pitching his shows too high. The first few seasons his show drew 20 million listeners, or three out of every four radio sets. By April 1947 Allen had joked his way onto the cover of *Time*, the supreme accolade. One year later, sunk to twenty-eighth place, he had become television’s most visible early victim.

Allen’s *Town Hall Tonight* was devised to replace various earlier ungly names that called attention not to the star but to the sponsor—*The Limit Bath Club Revue, The Salad Bowl Revue* (for Hellmann’s mayonnaise), *The Sal Hepatica Revue*. Overall, he did seven different shows for five major sponsors. Most of the time, the nervous sponsors felt his humor was over the heads of small-town America, but everyone looked forward to the star’s weekly amble down “Allen’s Alley” as characters like Titus Moody and Mrs. Nussbaum popped their head through a door and piped, “Howdy, bub,” or, “You vair eggspecting mebbe de Fink Spots?”

Nobody in radio battled censorship like Allen, who refused to back down before idiotic constraints dished out each week by the network and agency people second-guessing each other. Seen from today’s anything-goes perspective, the petty edits seem as funny as anything Allen devised on purpose, but the censors were on special alert and clamped down harder on Allen than on other comics, knowing his reputation for pointed satire. He kept a list of the words, lines, characters, and sketches he was forced to delete from his shows, such as *saffron, pizzicating a woman’s lavalier, labelasian, and titillate*, all considered dirty. A reference to a judge “going to a higher court” was deleted, since heaven was comically off-limits, as were jokes about ministers and marital vows, such as “She promises to love, honor, and lump it till death do them part.” Any sexual innuendo was fatal, and when Beatrice Lillie devised a stutter to get around the censors (“Son of a b-b-bachelor,” or “That’s a wh-wh-wh-whole lot of sh-sh-sh-shorting”), comics like Allen and Benny complained that Lillie was getting away with murder.

The slimmest possibility of offending a real person or place drew objections from an Allen censor who once scoured social registers and almanacs to make sure there wasn’t a real dowager named Mrs. Biddle Pratt, or a Senator Guff of Idaho (NBC allowed it only grudgingly, fearing there might be a Senator Guff someday); a fictitious first mate on the *Queen Mary* was stripped of a cockney accent because, reasoned NBC, the real first mate might object. A town called North Wrinkle had the censor combing maps and atlases to make sure no such place existed. A joke about “wasting an afternoon at the rodeo” was altered, presumably to avoid offending thin-skinned rodeo-goers. A gag about a girl who Allen said could have found a better husband in a cemetery was changed so as not to upset cemetery owners—or perhaps the deceased. NBC trembled when racists objected to black heavyweight champion Joe Louis calling Allen “Fred.” To placate advertisers, he had to cut “huckster” and a sketch about a town being blown away when someone ignited a gas leak; gas companies were sensitive. Allen complained to H. Allen Smith in a note, “each week fifty percent of what I write ends up in the toilet . . . practically everything is taboo and we end up with ersatz subject matter and ditto humor.”

Allen’s mastery of the ad lib caused special problems, for there’s no way to censor an ad lib and certain comics unleashed on other shows made the networks nervous. Bing Crosby and Jack Benny were also cited as loose cannons. Comics often snuck in ad libs during rebroadcasts to the West Coast. A female network censor suggested that Allen hold a meeting with Young & Rubicam to have him divulge “his sources of humor”—presumably to plug any possible humorous leaks at the source.

Allen learned how to outfox the censors by a favorite gag writers’ survival technique: He would include in each script a few decoy jokes to bargain away, holding on to the lines he really wanted in. Pat Weaver said Allen was “the one person I knew who was neither impressed nor frightened by the power of the agencies.”

Even hounded by censors, Allen got away with much more than most radio comedians, but he also *tried* to get away with much more. He took a certain pleasure in his rebel reputation and in making life hot for the censors, both on and off mike. Allen was never a reformer or a
radical but a satirist, content to work within the system even if he had no hope for it. In the words of an Allen scholar, Alan Havig, "Jeering was its own reward."

Jim North, an ad executive who worked on several radio shows, says, "Fred couldn't get along with anybody. That was his professional position. I wouldn't say he was feared but people were hesitant to cross him or take him on. He once called a skinny ad guy 'an ulcer with suspenders.' Fred Allen was usually right when it came to show business matters, but the reality was that the client had the last word and could say, 'Screw you, Fred Allen.'"

The Depression first pushed Allen into radio, as it did a lot of road-weary performers, guaranteeing him a season of work without travel, fleabag hotels, broken-down buses, booking hassles, sleazy producers, and tank-town theaters. As Allen observed, a "radio show could not close if there was nobody in the balcony."

He hit his stride on his 1934 show The Hour of Smiles, later retitled Town Hall Tonight and generally considered his best work. It was a low-budget affair that opened with a march down a mythical Main Street amid whoops, cheers, and band music interrupted by bystanders' remarks. He instinctively realized that setting his big-city satire on Main Street would more readily lure listeners who might otherwise be put off by the show's urbane material. "It seemed to me," he said, sounding like one of the demographically oriented agency men he hated, "that if we had a title that would interest people in small towns, our program would have wider appeal."

An ad agency executive forced him to change the show's title from Town Hall Tonight to The Fred Allen Show to make it conform more closely to Jack Benny's program, then the model of what a sophisticated show was like. It was felt that Town Hall Tonight sounded too small-town, which Allen had intended both ironically and sentimentally. "The colorful allusion had been completely stripped from the program," he later moaned. "We became just another group of actors gathered around a microphone in a radio studio."

Although his roots were deeply imbedded in vaudeville, where he billed himself "The World's Worst Juggler" and "Just a Young Fellow Trying to Get Along," Fred Allen came to radio via satirical Broadway musical revues—sophisticated little shows like, well, The Little Show; The Passing Show of 1922; and Three's a Crowd, which starred Allen, Clifton Webb, and Libby Holman, an unlikely trio. Of his radio show, he said, "You could take away the scripts from the cast, cut the best parts out of a few shows, and make a good Broadway revue out of them." These sophisticated revues—satirical, full of witty repartee, attuned to the headlines—were the vital transition that perfectly prepared him for radio.

Long after he became a radio star, Allen would return to old show business haunts for nostalgic visits and as a humbling antidote to the headiness of celebrity. Vaudeville always seemed a sweeter time to him than radio (as radio did to those who left it for TV or movies), and he sprinkled scripts with jokes about his life on the road and savored memories of his scruffy Boston boyhood.

The caricaturist Al Hirschfeld, a lifelong friend of Allen's (whose circle also included the S. J. Perelms and the William Saroyans), recalled, "Fred loved cheap hotels, absolutely adored them," and Arnold Auerbach added, "He was a permanent transient with the transient's aversion to possessions and long leases." Those cheerless rooming houses, with their peeling plaster walls lit by a single small bulb, were the sort of joint that provided Allen with memorable jokes on radio—"I had a room so small it had removable doorknobs," and, "The room was so small that the mice were hunchback." He disdained big-city life, declined to join the Algonquin Round Table, and vacationed at the same seedy beach in Maine each year, which he said was "so dull the tide went out and never came back." Here he pecked out scripts in happy solitude before the haven, Orchard Beach, became a tourist sandbox filled with autograph seekers. Perhaps with himself in mind, he once defined a celebrity as "a person who works hard all his life to become well known, then wears dark glasses to avoid being recognized."

Even though he came out of the same knockabout school of comedy as Joe Penner, Jack Pearl, and Ed Wynn, Allen was a more learned jester than most. His routines were filled with wild metaphors and acrobatic similes to which he gave newsy twists, such as a nasty 1933 hurricane that Allen described as having "wind so strong in one New Jersey town that it blew two prohibition workers into a speakeasy." Most comics
might have been satisfied with that, but Allen added a topper: “Luckily, the wind blew the speakeasy into a church and the bartender was converted.”

He was an avid reader of the classics—Twain and Dickens in particular. His trunk was always piled with books, and on tour he kept a copy of H. G. Wells’s Outline of History with him. His writers included the pre-Sergeant Bilko Nat Hiken and the pre-Caine Mutiny Herman Wouk, among many less famous others, such as Bob Weiskopf, who later wrote for I Love Lucy and All in the Family. Weiskopf, who specialized in writing the interview guest spot for Allen, recalls, “‘Allen’s Alley’ was real torture, because it was patched together with a roomful of writers, not written solo, like other segments. This required brainstorming aloud with other gag writers, with each session a matter of survival of the loudest. Fred liked mixing it up. He used to say, ‘From bad comes good.”

Weiskopf goes on, “I was pretty terrified, sitting in a room with the great man. I did okay because I was good at out-and-out jokes, but one guy was so terrified he didn’t open his mouth all season. I was working alone for the first time. It was my favorite show [to write for]. I got very friendly with Fred—our wives were friends—even though you try not to be social with the boss; the boss is the boss. I was with him to the end.” Aluding to Allen’s dark side, he adds, “To cope with him was difficult—he was a real W. C. Fields character.”

George Burns called Allen “an essentially gloomy man,” and Jack Benny said: “When you got him off vaudeville, Allen became somebody else, a bitter, frustrated and unhappy man. I couldn’t figure out why he was so unhappy about life. He thought life was some sort of miserable trap. I don’t know what he wanted or expected out of life or why he was so basically disgruntled about living.”

Herman Wouk told Allen’s biographer, Robert Taylor, of his devotion to his early boss: “He was a role model and still is. Fred was the most honorable man I ever met. He was the best comic writer radio ever developed, and we were handed in what must have seemed to him mediocre material. I was twenty-one years old and making two hundred dollars a week, a remarkable salary for the Depression. Not once did he tell us our contribution wasn’t good enough. We never had a contract. ‘Do you want to try it again for another year?’ Fred would say, and that was that. The purpose of having youngsters like myself around was simply to eke out the sheer volume of material.” Everyone, Wouk included, was heavily rewritten by Allen, who treated his staff like idea men providing raw material he could reshape.

Allen’s workaholism and weekly grind made him feel he “lived in a fog, a bedlam.” Despite a staff of three writers, Allen cowrote or rewrote by hand, in tiny letters, all fifty pages of each show. His head writer, Harry Tugend, would submit ten pages, and “even if he liked it, he’d feel a need to rewrite it,” or toss it out for a new idea, tinkering with a script up to final rehearsal.

Allen, like Benny, hired first-rate writers and prudently employed his wife—an old vaudeville ploy used by married acts as a way to double their income and expense money: If the comic’s wife had any talent, it was so much gravy. Married couples in radio seemed to have a built-in added appeal. Six of radio’s most popular comedy shows were husband-and-wife teams: George Burns and Grace Allen, Jim and Marian Jordan, Goodman and Jane Ace, Ozzie and Harriet Nelson, Jack and Mary Benny, and Allen and Hoffa.

Portland Hoffa, a version of the Gracie Allen archetype, played a naive secretary in a quavery, addled voice, addressed the host as “Mr. Al-l-I-len,” and read daffy letters from home, as did Gracie and Mary Livingstone. Even though she was Allen’s sidekick, Hoffa seemed the least defined character among the regulars, and at one point there was a thwarted attempt to drop her from the show. She began as Allen’s anonymous stooge, or “wooge” as she called it. She was, to quote one writer, “a decorative adjunct . . . a generic little girl” who fed him setup lines, but she evolved into a lovably daffy dame. She was always welcomed by such typical Allen lines as, “Well, as I try to make both ends meet in this tight vest, if it isn’t Portland!”

“I had no desire for show business,” Hoffa readily admitted, “but I got the breaks.” Allen had carefully nurtured her latent comedic skills from her days as a chorus girl in The Passing Show of 1922 and was fiercely protective of her. In a letter to an agency vice-president who told him the sponsor’s wife thought Portland should be dumped, he exploded: “You tell him that Portland is my wife, that she makes my life livable, and that her presence on the show is not a matter of negotiation. We’re a family and we work as a family. If he doesn’t want Mrs.
Allen, he doesn’t want Mr. Allen. I’m telling you and you tell him—never mention this subject to me again.”

Even by show business standards, the Allens were considered a slightly eccentric pair. Not only did they keep to themselves, but they would rather walk or take a subway than grab a taxi. Allen never learned to drive, worked out at a nearby YMCA instead of a nicer gym across the street, lived for years in a theatrical hotel, and dined at the same Italian restaurant the same night each week. An NBC executive wrote, “We speak of creatures of habit—Fred is a rigid mold of habit.” Arnold Auerbach added that for Allen, “life was ritualistic in its regularity. His week—immutable, symmetrical as the solar system—revolved around a single sixty minutes—the hour on Wednesday when Town Hall Tonight was on the air. He lived for Portland and for the program.”

If Jack Benny’s show was about his actual radio family, Allen fashioned his radio gang out of a handful of deft dialect comics who—as a money-saving device—could play assorted characters, a quartet who found fame years later as habituants of “Allen’s Alley”: Peter Donald, Minerva Pious, Parker Fennelly, and Kenny Delmar, who also covered as announcer and straight man. Their alter egos were Ajax Cassidy, Mrs. Nussbaum, Titus Moody, and, most celebrated of all, Delmar’s Senator Claghorn, an inspired name still synonymous with Southern windbags, who contributed “That’s a joke, son!” to the American idiom.

For Allen, ethnic humor was a handy comic tool left over from vaudeville, like daffy names, but by 1945 it felt old. After the war, certain Jewish groups weren’t pleased by Mrs. Nussbaum, and at first Allen had to fight to keep her on the show. Jews were also shocked when Allen first uttered the word shmoes (a laundered locution for schmuck, Yiddish for “penis”). Yiddishisms had not yet permeated the airwaves, as they would a generation later on late-night TV.

Nonetheless, Mrs. Nussbaum was hard to resist when she opened the door and delivered her trademark opener: “You vair eggspecting mebbe Cecil B. Schlemiel?” (or “Emperor Shapiro-Hito,” “Dinah Schnoor,” etc.). Pious, a keen dialectician, played her with warmth, spirit, and self-mockery. With mangled references to “rutabagels,” “Rudyard Kaplan,” and “Weinstein Churchill,” she was as charming as Leo Rosten’s literary immigrant Hyman Kaplan.

“Allen’s Alley” was really just another excuse for Allen to bounce news items off recurring characters, but the Alley’s residents had larger-than-life personalities. Also, it took advantage of Allen’s favorite comic forum—the man-in-the-street interview (revived by Steve Allen on TV), then newly in vogue, when Roper, Hooper, and Gallup pollsters were on every corner, clipboards in hand.

Delmar’s Senator Beauregard Claghorn was a fierce defender of Southern pride, who never drove through the Lincoln Tunnel, drank only from Dixie cups, and wore Kentucky derbies. Delmar was a radio veteran—he had played the secretary of state on Orson Welles’s War of the Worlds—but his yakkity Claghorn character was so popular it resulted in spin-off items: compasses that only pointed south and a record entitled That’s a Joke, Son! What made Claghorn so funny wasn’t just the anti-Yankee jokes but the dithering frenzy with which Delmar portrayed him.

Half the fun of “Allen’s Alley” was the weekly ritual of Allen and Hoffa moseying down the imaginary side street encountering familiar characters. Allen: “Well, here we are, back in Allen’s Alley, Portland. I wonder if the Senator’s home. Let’s knock. (rap-rap-rap)” . . . Claghorn: “Somebody—ah, say, somebody pounded mah plywood!”

Fennelly’s Titus Moody was Allen’s favorite character, the definitive weathered, tight-lipped New Englander who espoused the host’s skeptical, old-fashioned values: “Effen I ain’t a rube,” Titus said, “I’ll do till one gets here.” Titus to Allen: “My Granny used to play the zither.” Allen: “Was your grandmother good?” Titus: “When Granny’d play ‘Can She Bake a Cherry Pie, Billy Boy,’ you could smell cookin’ comin’ outta the zither.”

Fennelly, who claimed, “I was born old,” had perfected the type in previous radio incarnations; Cliff Arquette and Bill Thompson played a version of Moody on Fibber McGee and Molly—The Old-Timer. The character reappeared decades later on TV selling pies with Fennelly as the pipe-puffing, crusty Pepperidge Farm man. Before Allen finally arrived at the magic formula that paid off in 1942 as “Allen’s Alley,” he tinkered with the idea for years in several formats, first as “Town Hall News,” then “Passé News” (a riff on Pathé newsreels), then “The March of Trivia” (The March of Time), all based on news items Allen scoured for absurdities.
“Allen’s Alley” gave the transient nature of Allen’s shows a hook and a continuity his earlier programs had lacked; the trade-off was that the Alley characters grew predictable. Benny had his circle and Fibber McGee and Molly their Wistful Vista neighbors. Most comedy shows had a crew of much-anticipated drop-ins whose familiar greetings were met with authentic warm applause. It was one of radio’s most reliable ways of bonding with its invisible audience.

The ethnic mix of an Irishman, a Jew, a Yankee, and a son of Dixie helped give the show its cosmopolitan flavor. By 1942, many comedy shows were sunnily ensconced in Los Angeles, the site of all the inside-L.A. jokes that replaced the New York jokes about the Dodgers, the Automat, the Sixth Avenue El, the Bronx Zoo, Macy’s vs. Gimbel’s, sidewalk vendors, and rude taxi drivers.

Jack Benny’s long “feud” with Fred Allen bounced between their two shows and fueled both stars’ comic images for a decade. Allen was the ideal man for the role of Benny provocateur. His barbs echoed Benny’s in-house needlers. Without insult humor, radio comedy might have gone out of business by 1925, or as Allen had announcer Harry Von Zell cannily observe on one show: “You know how all these programs start, Fred. If the announcer doesn’t insult the comedian, people don’t even know it’s a comedy show.”

The Allen-Benny mock feud was the most successful in radio (and gave rise to Hope and Crosby’s copycat feud), pitting two of the country’s most popular comics against each other in what became a well-milked long-running gag, a mutually beneficial insult marathon that grew wilder by the month. “That guy’s so cheap,” said Allen in a typical sally, “he’d put his finger down a moth’s throat to get his cloth back.” Benny had less to work with—Allen, despite his radio presence, had a pallid comic persona—so his comebacks were mainly about Allen’s baggy eyes or nasal twang. Each time one comic appeared on the other’s show, ratings zoomed, all of it climaxing in a heavily hyped face-to-face confrontation at the Hotel Pierre in New York, by which time the feud had pretty well played itself out; the face-off was anticlimactic, but a glorious publicity coup. Listeners enjoyed the not very lethal badinage. Allen: “The first time I met Benny was in Elyria, Ohio. He was doing a monologue with a pig on stage” . . . Hoffa: “A pig?” . . . Allen: “Yes, the pig was there to eat up the stuff the audience threw at Benny.”

The first shot was fired in 1936 by Allen on his year-end show, following violin prodigy Stewart Canin playing “The Flight of the Bumblebee,” which prompted Allen’s relatively innocuous jab, “You play ‘The Bee’ so well—Jack Benny ought to be ashamed of himself.” For the benign Benny, it was almost a compliment, he explained later: “He probably said that, knowing I was listening to the show, just to make me laugh.” The feud went on for six months before either comedian telephoned the other to discuss it. For the stars it was a running gag that got out of hand when the media seized on it and turned it into a papier-mâché battle.

It may sound toothless now, but listeners relished hearing two comics dueling across the dial, as if Jay Leno and David Letterman were to begin lobbing comic grenades back and forth today. Allen theorized that the feud caught on because at the time “radio was fraught with politeness”—honed crooners, genial announcers, sappy soap operas, and banter that barely left a flesh wound.

Benny and Allen also shared mediocre movie careers and once costarred in a picture neither liked, Love Thy Neighbor. Allen made five movies in all, halfhearted affairs like It’s in the Bag, Thanks a Million, and We’re Not Married, opposite Ginger Rogers, in which they play a husband and wife (modeled on radio’s Dorothy and Dick and Tex and Jinx) who host a jolly morning talk show but loathe each other off-mike; Woody Allen later rephrased the same ground in his movie Radio Days.

Like most radio comics who tried to cross over into movies and, later, TV, Allen’s physical presence wasn’t as funny as his voice alone; a biographer wrote that Allen didn’t photograph well, observing that “his attitude toward the camera was shy and vigilant.” In an early film short, The Collector, he looks deflated, slouchy, and flat-footed, as he did on his later unhappy TV appearances. His literate jokes don’t amuse the camera, which he appears to be dodging, and his relaxed radio timing is stilted. Of all the great radio comedians, only Bob Hope matched his radio success in movies. Benny, Allen, Burns and Allen, Bergen and McCarthy, Brice, Berle, Durante, Wynn, Amos ‘n’ Andy,
Fibber McGee and Molly, Lum and Abner, The Goldbergs—all were cinematic flops to one degree or another, for a variety of reasons.

It didn't help that Allen also hated Los Angeles, but the city inspired his sharpest cracks—"To me, it all looks like Waterbury on a rainy Sunday," he called the Hollywood Bowl "Carnegie Hall on the half-shell," said, "Hollywood is a place where people from Iowa mistake each other for stars," and defined an associate producer as "the only guy in Hollywood who will associate with a producer."

Fred Allen never made the transition to television, not only because he distrusted the new visual medium ("They call it a medium because nothing on it is ever well done," he said, a line since appropriated by one and all) but because his wit was too verbal and cerebral. One of his favorite targets was a manic giveaway show, Pot O' Gold, which he parodied as "The Tub o' Silver," but he was put out of business by just such a show, Stop the Music, which held America in thrall from week to week awaiting the name of the "Mystery Melody."

Opposite Stop the Music, Allen's 1948 ratings collapsed from 28.7 to 11.2, while the quiz show leaped from 0 to 20 within months; even Bob Hope's show fell from 23.8 percent in 1949 to 12.7 by 1951. Allen—suddenly a ghost of radio past—toppled almost instantaneously, a major victim of the giveaway fad that overtook radio in the late 1940s as a desperate ploy to keep listeners tuned in and deflect their attention from the dreaded tube that had begun creeping into homes like an invasion of one-eyed body-snatchers.

Allen tried to fend off the alien form with satire, but it failed him for the first time in his career. His instinctive comic response, called "Cease the Music," offered listeners two floors of the Empire State Building, 4,000 yards of used dental floss, 800 pounds of putty for every member of the family, the gangplank of the Queen Mary, and 12 miles of railroad track to the first caller. Interestingly, however, he caved in and actually awarded $5,000. Then he got mad and lost his sense of humor. Edgar Bergen, also on opposite Stop the Music, simply retreated from radio for a season, but Allen was drawn into the fight—not just out of survival instinct, but out of a deep resentment at how radio was being ruined by what amounted to tawdry "bank nights," the movie theaters' frantic response to TV. The sad truth was that Allen's small-town world—even Allen himself—was being overwhelmed. The critic Harriet Van Horne wrote that Stop the Music had "tumbled Fred Allen from the plush pew reserved for Hooper's Top 10 to a camp stool in back of Lum and Abner."

It was hard to believe that people once had actually scalped free tickets to the Allen show. On one of his last shows, in October 1948, Allen attacked the quiz phenomenon in a thinly veiled crusade that didn't hide his true anger. He referred to contestants as "a herd of morons," adding, "Many winners are so dumb that they can't find their way out of the building." He sourly advised a young would-be broadcaster that a good way to break into radio would be to shoot a quiz-show MC, adding: "A lot of listeners will be grateful to you for killing the m.c. and good will is important if you hope to survive in radio."

A year later, with the gag writing on the wall, he narrated a program called "The State of American Humor" and delivered a grim obituary on radio comedy that included an embittered interview with announcer Ben Grauer, who said, "Then you see little hope for humor in radio?" Allen responded, "I never thought I'd live to see the day when I'd have to compete with a washing machine. Ice boxes are replacing actors and musicians. The idea seems to be, if you can't entertain people, give them something. If that's not a sorry comment on contemporary entertainment, I don't know what is." He also got in a well-aimed jab at TV: "In the beginning, television drove people out of their homes into saloons [to watch it], but now people have sets in their homes and TV is driving people back into the saloons."

Grauer, hoping to end on an upbeat note, chirped, "But it's a new source of humor, Fred," only to have Allen grump, "Aw, new source of humor! So far it's nothing but a throwback, reviving the vaudeville approach to everything from mugging to juggling"—conveniently forgetting that radio was founded by the ancestors of those very same muggers and jugglers, himself among them.

Allen, bitterly and too easily, blamed his old nemesis Madison Avenue, but he was simply worn-out. He had, after all, survived longer than almost everyone else. When his show was trimmed from an hour to thirty minutes, in 1945, he was forced to compress sketches and banter, and much of the unforced quality went out of the show. After so long, burnout was inevitable, especially for a man of Allen's intense
nature. Arnold Auerbach admitted as much: “After 200 broadcasts, freshness and enthusiasm inevitably wane; formulas resurface; set patterns emerge. In one season of radio, we would tell more jokes than Weber & Fields probably told in ten years.” In fact, his show had become somewhat predictable and, for all its topicality, had a shop-worn feeling by the late 1940s. The last regular Fred Allen Show aired on June 26, 1949, nearly eighteen years after he had arrived on radio as a breath of fresh air.

Despite his reluctance to enter TV, he proposed a video version of “Allen’s Alley,” but it never happened—his hangdog face and acidic personality didn’t have a chance in the jolly family-centered universe of 1950s TV, where seldom was heard a discouraging, let alone disdainful, word. Pre-cable TV, with precious few exceptions (Sid Caesar’s shows, Saturday Night Live, SCTV, The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour) was never as receptive to biting satire as radio. Radio was, and remains even now, TV’s off-Broadway.

Allen wound up as one of several rotating stars of The Colgate Comedy Hour, but it was largely a defensive tactic. “I’mfending off oblivion,” he told colleagues who wondered why he deigned to go on TV in ill-suited formats. “The Fred Allen of What’s My Line?,” Steve Allen said, “was not the real Fred Allen.” The real Fred Allen said of TV, “They’re just photographing vaudeville,” and, more famously, “Imitation is the sincerest form of television.”

Bob Weiskopf, who was there at the end, reflects on Allen’s demise: “He made a big mistake. He thought that when TV came along, he could use his radio scripts. He did a few TV scripts, though, that were really very good. But Fred was impatient. If he’d have stuck around he’d have made it.” What stymied him, Weiskopf believes, wasn’t just TV itself but that “he couldn’t figure out how to stage ‘Allen’s Alley’” for television; incredibly, he considered reviving “Allen’s Alley” with puppets. Perhaps because Allen “had a way of thinking visually,” adds Weiskopf, TV was superfluous. “He could act vocally. In radio, voice was movement.” He made a halfhearted stab hosting, of all things, a TV game show, Judge for Yourself, on which a jury gave thumbs-up or -down to new performers, but the expected peppery repartee never happened. With undisguised bile, Allen called TV “a device that permits people who haven’t anything to do to watch people who can’t do anything.”

In fact, TV became a medium for neovaudevillians like Jackie Gleason, Sid Caesar, Martin and Lewis, Dick Van Dyke, and Lucille Ball, or for reborn burlesque bananas like Sid Caesar, Abbott and Costello, Martha Raye, and, most of all, Berle. Allen fell between the cracks. Just as many radio comedians leaned too heavily on the visual, Allen’s humor was too verbal for TV. When you think of Fred Allen, you don’t think of how he looked but how he sounded and what he said; when you think of Lucille Ball, you can’t remember a thing she ever said that was remotely funny, but you remember the face, the takes.

What Allen lacked was TV presence. Pat Weaver said, “It broke my heart to watch him on TV. If I had been able to put him on the Tonight show, his ability to ad-lib would have made him even more legendary than he is.” He wasn’t lovable enough for the 1950s, but would have been just right for the cynical and ironic 1990s.

Finally, Fred Allen became a kind of comic emeritus. He joined the writing and performing staff of radio’s last gasp, The Big Show, a $100,000-a-program extravaganza hosted by Tallulah Bankhead and featuring mighty headliners—Ethel Merman, Fanny Brice, Groucho Marx, Jane Powell; Allen worked on the scripts.

He hosted a few episodes of TV’s big show, The Colgate Comedy Hour, a Sunday-night rival to The Ed Sullivan Show, with rotating comic hosts like Martin and Lewis, Cantor, Durante, and Wynn, but the first shows—and his doctor—convinced him to give it up. It wasn’t just that TV was a new medium; the entire atmosphere and procedure were foreign to him, plus he had to work with performers he didn’t respect. It wasn’t fun anymore.

As he wrote to Herman Wouk in an exhausted voice: “outside of a panel deal or some easy show that i could ad lib, i don’t think i can cope with the furor most of these musical revues stir up. i have only done the tv guest dates to keep occupied. it has been a new experience doing what other comedians have wanted. for almost 18 years i was telling them what to do on my own show. most of the revues are assembled to the accompaniment of the bloodiest bedlam you can imagine. it is almost impossible to be relaxed working with comedy material you barely know.”

He also wondered if anyone still cared. “Radio,” he wrote in a melancholy voice in his memoirs, Treadmill to Oblivion, “smelled of
yesterday"s levity." Another time, feeling less immodest about his own great contribution, he called his show "a history of this country done in a comedy mode." Treadmill to Oblivion became the best selling book on radio ever written, due in part to Allen's drumbeating. He paid for newspaper ads himself and, anticipating today's talk-show author tours, plugged the book all over radio and TV. A Boston critic offered an Allenesque compliment: "It's a shame that television has no place for Allen. He has been reduced to writing books."

Fred Allen died on St. Patrick's Day 1956, while taking one of his regular midnight strolls up 57th Street from his suite at the Warwick Hotel. Herman Wouk eulogized his former mentor in the New York Times, saying: "Without a doubt his great contribution to life in America came in the marvelous eighteen-year run of weekly satiric invention. . . . His was the glory of being an original personality, creating new forms of intelligent entertainment. He was without a peer and without a successful imitator." Wouk went on: "He had a deep reticent love of life and of people which is the source of every true satirist's energy. Fred's wit lashed and stung. He could not suffer fools. But his generosity to the needy, his extraordinary loyalty to his associates (in a field not noted for long loyalties) showed the warmth of heart that made his satire sound and important. In Fred Allen the voice of sanity spoke out for all Americans to hear, during a trying period of our history, in the penetrating tones of comic satire. Because he lived and wrote and acted here, this land will always be a saner place to live. That fact is his true monument."