Bob Hope parlayed the routine skills of a song-and-dance man into one of the great American show business careers, using radio as his route from stage to screen to legend, fading only when his superpatriotism came home to haunt him during the Vietnam era.

Hope was the consummate entertainer, an amazingly adaptable performer who shifted easily from vaudeville to Broadway to radio to movies to concerts to TV—all with the same jaunty, larky ease. One of his few career stumbles was a failed screen test for MGM in 1930 that delayed his film career. If he had done nothing else but movies, Hope would leave a memorable body of work, from classic farces like Monsieur Beaucaire and Paleface to the beloved Road pictures with Bing Crosby to sophisticated comedies like The Facts of Life and That Certain Feeling to gentler comedies and light biographies like Sorrowful Jones, The Lemon Drop Kid, The Seven Little Foys, and Beau James.

All of this, mind you, while maintaining a hugely popular radio show for fifteen years—followed by another quarter century as a TV star, not to mention a raft of best-selling joke-stuffed memoirs from World War II on (I Never Left Home; Have Tux, Will Travel; Don’t Shooit, It’s Only Me; etc.). For decades, Hope was everywhere at once, even in a comic book that captured his swaggering persona—a cockier, more dashing switch on Jack Benny’s boastful buffoon; and no newsreel was complete without a shot of Hope cutting up on the golf course with Crosby or Ike. He hosted the Academy Awards so long, beginning when they were broadcast on radio, that it was the equivalent of a Supreme Court appointment; when he was finally replaced by Johnny Carson, it seemed to many an act of treason. And no comic since Hope has been as courted by presidents, each of whom, upon taking the oath, needed to be blessed not just by a Billy Graham prayer but by a Bob Hope punch line. By the 1950s, he was in training for American icon-

thood. He retired reluctantly at ninety-three, but only after growing nearly deaf and blind.

Hard though it is to believe now, for any kid coming of age in the 1940s and 1950s Bob Hope was America’s most famous dirty comic, reportedly censored weekly by NBC for nasty lines that got cut off the air. Although he loved blue material at banquets and roasts (where he often indulged in his little-known skill at dialects, notably black and swish), most of the on-air tales were apocryphal but made him seem daring and wicked. It wasn’t the actual lines that established his naughty persona so much as Hope’s provocative delivery. Off-mike and generally unknown to listeners of that rose-colored era, moreover, Hope was one of show business’s leading philanderers, with girls in every port—and, around Los Angeles, on nearly every block. In the 1940s he was as potent as any rock star. A former Hope comedy writer, Sherwood Schwartz, recalls, “There were always five or six young pretty girls hanging around in the corridors outside Hope’s room, sort of like today’s groupies.”

Hope took Jack Benny’s schmooch character to a flashier level and ran with it on radio, using only his voice and superbly crafted jokes to build his character into the sleek, fast-talking Don Juan who he later played on films and, less skillfully, on TV, where he often seemed to be on autopilot, breaking up endlessly during listless sketches, his eyes furtively searching for cue cards. Steve Allen remembers a party during his TV reign when Hope gave a speech that cracked everyone up. At one point, Allen turned around and spotted Hope’s cue-card man, Barney McNulty, kneeling down in the mud behind some bushes flipping the cards while shining a flashlight on the lines.

All that came long after his reign on radio, where, with a silky effortlessness he glided from joke to joke, guest to guest, show to show, decade to decade—singing, joking, MC’ing, and enacting radio versions of his movies. He once noted: “I’ve been lucky. It’s just never stopped. I never had a slow time, except once when I didn’t think Paramount would pick up my option. Then I fell into the whole USO thing.” Fell? Leaped would be more like it.

From his first broadcast for the troops at March Field air base in California, on May 6, 1941, Hope discovered an audience that iden-
tified with his red-blooded male humor. It wasn’t all altruism and patrio-
tism. The GI camps were ideal both for Hope’s professional and per-
sonal purposes: Not only were servicemen a large, laugh-starved
captive audience that responded loudly to inside military jokes, but
Hope was their kind of horny guy. When he heedled at this or that Miss
Whoozis, it wasn’t just for a laugh.

As chronicled by Arthur Marx, the coauthor of seven Hope films, in
an unauthorized biography, Hope’s ulterior motive for his overseas
trips and on-the-go schedule was to provide camouflage for his love
nests of far-flung mistresses, often plucked from a waiting bevy of star-
lets or the latest Miss World contest (Marx claims Hope rigged page-
cants to crown whatever girl he fancied). In Hope, every sexed-up
soldier sensed a soulmate. Though he truly loved GIs—telephoning rela-
tives of injured men overseas when he got home—he also needed
them, for they roared at every joke. Steve Allen observed, “Bob Hope is
never as popular as when there is a war going on.”

Like Howard Stern, Hope was much discussed and quoted the
morning after each Tuesday night’s show, sandwiched between the Fib-
ber McGee and Molly and Red Skelton shows. The next day, junior-
high boys’ rooms across the nation were thick with cigarette smoke and
delicious tales of what lascivious lines Hope had allegedly gotten off
the night before to “sweater girls” like Jane Russell, Terry Moore, Marie
(“The Body”) MacDonald, Anita Ekberg, or Jayne Mansfield. He
wisely did nothing to discourage the stories, which turned up in all the
columns, fueled by his secret womanizing and bad-boy penchant, as in
this exchange (swiftly drowned out by organ music) with Dorothy
Lamour when Lamour said, “I’ll meet you in front of the pawnshop,”
and Hope, after replying, “Okay,” added, “... and then you can kiss
me under the balls.” Another time, Lamour said, “Don’t take me seri-
ously, Bob. I was just pulling your leg.” To which Hope reportedly ad-
libbed, “Listen, Dottie, you can pull my right leg and you can pull my
left leg, but don’t mess with Mr. In-Between.” A more typical shade of
light-blue Hope humor is this exchange, fairly ribald for 1940s radio:

Hope: Some park.
Girl: Some park.
Hope: Some grass.

Girl: Some grass.
Hope: Some dew.
Girl: I don’t.

His prophetic opening line on his first show, The Rippling Rhythms
Revue, was, “This is the voice of inexperience, Bob Hope.” A critic
called him “easy to take but hard to remember.” Hope and Wilkie
Mahoney, a writer for Uncle Billy’s Whiz Bang, a girls-and-gags maga-
azine, wrote the show themselves; the other regulars were tenor James
Melton, singer Jane Froman, and bandleader Al Goodman. His fe-
male foil was a beautiful blonde Georgia comedienne named Patricia
“Honey Chile” Wilder, who reappeared later on his successful Peps-
doent broadcasts—his first of many luscious straight women (some of
whom were also occasional lovers), among them Janis Paige, Joey
Heatherton, Barbara Payton, Gloria De Haven, and Marilyn Maxwell,
with whom he had a serious long-term affair and whom he wanted to
marry.

He became a far more viable radio commodity after costarring in a
hit Broadway musical in 1933, Roberta, and appearing in the star-
packed film, The Big Broadcast of 1938. By 1939, he had joined the
ranks of Allen, Benny, and Bergen, placing fourth behind them in a crit-
ics’ poll. A year later, he was first; one reviewer called his jokes old but
said he “wore well” due to his “self-joshing,” another trait that marked
his style.

A weekly seven-minute monologue on a short-lived 1938 Dick Pow-
 ell show, Your Hollywood Parade, was Hope’s real breakthrough, but
he had earned it. As his wife, Dolores, recalled, “He used to rehearse a
whole week for those seven minutes. He’d been terrified at first and not
at all sure of himself, but within a few weeks he had all the poise he
needed. The response had given it to him and I’m sure the response
came because he was so refreshing—a wit instead of a buffoon.” The
show failed, but Hope got national exposure—and also a great theme
song, thanks to a huge career- and ego-boosting review from Damon
Runyon, who wrote an entire column about Hope’s duet with Shirley
Ross of a tune he had sung in The Big Broadcast of 1938 called
“Thanks for the Memory.” Runyon gushed, “What a delivery, what a
song, what an audience reception!”
Hope then met an advertising man named Ed Lasker, son of the tycoon Albert Lasker, owner of the Pepsodent company, who gave him a second chance to host a show; radio was a forgiving medium. On his first broadcast, to ensure boffo laughs, Hope (like Ed Wynn and Eddie Cantor years earlier) dressed up in a cowboy costume for a western-parody number. “It just seemed too strange to talk into a microphone in a studio instead of playing it for real in front of an audience.”

He hired eight writers to keep him supplied with gags, and paid them out of his salary of twenty-five hundred dollars a week. “No comic had ever tried to maintain a staff that size,” he said. “But I wanted to be Number One, and I knew that jokes were the key. I was willing to pay for it and I must say, looking back, I got much more than I paid for.” His forte, he realized, wasn’t funny voices and faces but a polished delivery.

That original staff included Mel Shavelson, Norman Panama, Jack Rose, Sherwood Schwartz, and Schwartz’s brother Al. The writing crew eventually grew to fifteen, and nearly every comedy writer in the business seems to have put in time on the celebrated Hope assembly line that the comedian commanded like a CEO. As his longtime agent, Jimmy Saphier, once said, “If Bob hadn’t become an actor, he could have been the head of General Motors.”

“All these comedy minds were necessary if I was going to carry out my plan, which was almost unheard of at the time,” Hope has said. “It was to go on the air every week with topical jokes written right up to airtime. Even if they weren’t all good, they would give the Pepsodent show an immediacy I find missing today, when so many shows are taped in advance. And we had no canned laughter then to cover the clinkers or create hilarity on cue. We had to be good, or else. It was life or death, sink or swim.” He added, “We used to preview the Pepsodent show on Sunday nights, throwing in every joke we thought might have a chance. The studio audience laughs told us which were funny.”

During the three hours before the repeat West Coast broadcast Tuesday at 10 P.M., he and his writers ground out new jokes to replace those that hadn’t worked the first time around. Mel Shavelson remembered rewriting frantically between broadcasts until a line got a laugh, with Hope throwing new jokes out as fast as he got them. “He finally agreed on a joke just about thirty seconds before it went into the sketch and it laid a big egg, but that’s how immediate it was. . . . One little incident could change the whole feeling of an audience, so it was the greatest training ground for a comedy writer there could be.” Larry Gelbart adds: “They weren’t one-liners, they were half-liners. It was almost like writing bumper-stickers.”

Writers put together a ninety-minute script, which was then pruned to thirty minutes. Ideas for each week’s show were written on a large blackboard. “In those beleaguered days,” Hope said, “the competition among the writers was so fierce, each one would try to outdo the other by handing in more jokes. Finally, they realized they were each writing almost twenty pages of comedy a day, a suicidal pace. They made a pact to cut down the material. They figured that if they all cut down by the same amount, one page a day, I would never notice what was happening.”

The writer Mort Lachman recalls that Hope, unlike more selfish comics such as Cantor and Skelton (who once told Jack Paar, “God tells me what to say”), was always secure about his talent. “Bob had been in vaudeville and on Broadway, so he enjoyed writers—and yet he was the most capable ad-libber of all of them. He could do it.” Hope also liked audiences, says Lachman, and not all comics did; they fear them. Moreover, Hope was unusually cool under fire. Once, recalls Lachman, a show ran short a few minutes and Hope, told he had to fill time, remembered five jokes cut from the monologue and smoothly recalled them all—in their correct order.

Hope braved network censors over double entendres and risked being cut off the air. NBC executive Walter Bunker, charged with bleeping Hope—which called for instant reflexes—recalls: “When he went to say the word I’d bloop him right out and cut back in again right after. I think he was surprised that we’d do that. But radio listeners weren’t like audiences today. They were easily shocked by anything slightly risqué, and you could lose ’em easily.” On the other hand, the writer Hal Goodman claimed, “If he didn’t want a joke to get a laugh, like something you’d fought to keep in but he didn’t believe in, he’d deliver the line badly just to prove his point.”

Hope expected writers to devote themselves as fully to the show as he did. “Not everyone could do it,” says Lachman. Hope might call from South Bend, Indiana, on the eve of a banquet at Notre Dame and,
as if dialing room service, order up two football jokes and a Catholic priest joke. It was part of every Hope gagman's job; the boss also figure he owned every joke his writers thought up, even the rejected ones. All jokes became his property and were stored away in the vast files he has kept for half a century, indexed by topic and date, that filled a two-thousand-square-foot vault on his sprawling Toluca Lake estate until he donated them to an archive in 1998.

Although he made a conscious effort to hire the best (and most extensive group of) writers in the business, Hope, a natural comic actor, was not merely the product of his writers. Over time a character emerged from the one-line barrage: Hope as the intrepid smart aleck and failed Romeo who was all bluff, Hope as the luckless con man everyone saw through, Hope as the ridiculous poseur. In his schizoid character, Hope the patsy—whether coward, klutz, con artist, or cad—keeps making a liar and a fool of Hope the fast-talking, skirt-chasing wiseacre.

He never pretended to be a natural clown, but like Benny he was a superb technician with a sure sense of what worked for the well-defined Bob Hope character, which Steve Allen once noted has a particularly American edge: “He is the perennial wiseguy whose braggadocio is made palatable by the fact that in the last analysis he gets it in the neck. The average middle-class American would never envision himself as a New York neurotic Woody Allen, a wild and crazy Steve Martin, or a leering Groucho Marx; he would probably picture himself as something like Bob Hope.” In short, he was far more than the sum of his monologue. As Hope himself said, “The character that's now known as Bob Hope didn’t leap, full-grown, from some writer's typewriter. It developed over several seasons—like a weed...”

Hope's radio image as a sly, sexy, modern city boy with a gift of gab, a kind of joke-peddling Harold Hill, was fleshed out even further when he teamed with Bing Crosby in *The Road to Morocco, The Road to Singapore*, etc., where Hope played the perpetually failed lover boy to Crosby's cool romancing crooner who got the girl without batting a pale eyelash. (Offstage, they were pals who even traded girlfriends but remained fiercely competitive otherwise; Hope was authentically envious over Crosby's Oscar for *Going My Way*.)

By the late 1940s, however, the dueling-golf-stick gags had worn so thin that a *Variety* critic, in a sigh of despair, said Hope's show epitomized "radio's sad saga of sameness." He added, "Apparently it's just too much to expect that Hope would veer an inch from his time-tested routine. His answer, it goes without saying, is: Why get out of the rut as long as there's pay dirt in it? Who's going to outlive the other, Hope or the listening public?"

Hope struggled to keep up to date even in his twilight years in TV, when he was trading on old triumphs, cashing in goodwill chips, and celebrity-dropping with that year's favorite new faces—few of whom he seemed to recognize. To stay hip, he would slip into the back row of neighborhood movie houses to see new films and stars. "We're contemporary all the time," he boasted, in a mid-1980s interview, when plainly he was sliding into history. "Last year, we did a show that was a satire on TV. It got a 38 rating. Didja see it? I had five gorgeous gals on it." In interviews, he automatically shifted into his jaunty on-air mode. It was hard to know where the public and private Bob Hope divided, or if they ever did.

Hope's topical humor was in the tradition of Will Rogers. He arrived warm on the heels of Rogers in 1935 (the year the cowboy laureate died) in various revues before nailing down his Pepsodent program. He was far less political than Rogers or, to be sure, Mort Sahl;
while Sahl used a scalpel, Hope brandished a rubber knife—his political zingers were as lethal as Johnny Carson’s: “Senator McCarthy got off a train in Washington, D.C., and spent two days at Union Station investigating Red Caps. McCarthy is a new type of television show—it’s sort of a soap opera where everything comes out tattletale gray.”

By radio comedy standards of the time, Hope’s patter seemed topical, since many of the references were to current affairs even if they were really just setups for polite gags. He could sound ultrahip just by mentioning a fad like Metrecal, or politicians and labor leaders like Dean Acheson, John L. Lewis, Walter Reuther, or James Petrillo (the musicians’ union boss). Hope wisely intuited that topicalizing jokes would make ordinary—and especially old—lines seem fresh. But for Hope, the joke was always the thing. He was far too much the ambitious careerist, the give-’em-what-they-want pro, to sink his political barbs below the surface.

It was on radio that Hope polished his joke-a-second style (more like six or seven a minute, according to one laugh meter), learning how to top jokes, to cushion bad jokes with “savers” (a technique perfected earlier by Milton Berle) and, most of all, to throw away jokes, artfully building his routine into the seamless tommy-gun monologue that made his name. Despite his on-call staff of jokesmiths (“You wouldn’t say that if my writers were here,” he liked to say, a steal from Jack Benny), he was a lightning ad-libber and born stand-up comic.

“My method, as it developed in early monologues,” Hope once wrote, “was to deliver a series of one-liners, joke joke joke. It was a style similar to Winchell’s staccato delivery. I would zing a joke and then start on the next line and wait for the audience to catch up. Then I’d ad-lib, ‘Laugh first, figure it out later.’ I’d say, ‘Which one are you working on?’ The style chews up jokes in carload lots.” Once told that Hope was taking six writers with him on the road, Groucho Marx cracked, “For Hope that’s practically ad-libbing.”

Hope had also learned how to let his voice convey his entire persona within the confines of a standard comedy show with guest stars, an orchestra leader–foil (Skinnay Ennis, then Les Brown), a singer (Frances Langford), announcer, and regular sidekicks—the man-hunting “Vera Vague,” Barbara Jo Allen, and the surreal Jerry Colonna, a pop-eyed wild man with a walrus mustache. Called “Professor” by Hope, Colonna bellowed songs in a comic caterwaul and, in the early days of the show, went around saying, “Who’s Yehudi?”, a non sequitur tag line to an old joke. Colonna brought a whacked-out touch to Hope’s show. In a typical exchange, Hope asks, “Professor, did you plant the bomb in the embassy like I told you?,” to which Colonna replied, in that whooping five-alarm voice, “Embassy? Great Scott, I thought you said NBC!”

Hope’s persona was easy to write for, remarked Dick Cavett, who began as a TV comedy writer: “The sound of the line is as important as the joke it contains, at least with the great comics. You need funny ideas, but there is something about the great comics’ voices.” He cited Hope, Benny, Allen, and Groucho Marx—all of whom had voices that could transcend a joke or propel it with twice its intrinsic worth.

“I know how to snap a line, then cover it, then speed on to the next,” Hope once remarked, referring to his trademark way of “covering” a line by talking over the laugh (“But I just wanna say . . .”), as if he didn’t mean it as a joke. Eventually, he became almost too efficient, removed from the occasion, and rattled off lines mechanically, with a kind of rote indifference. Or, as Steve Allen put it, “It was as if he was saying, ‘These are the jokes, folks. Laugh or not, I don’t care.’”

In a rare moment of self-analysis, Hope once likened his craft to a ball game: “You have to get over to the audience that there’s a game going on and that if they don’t stay awake they’ll miss something, like missing a baseball someone has lobbed to them. What I’m really doing is asking, ‘Let’s see if you can hit this one!’ That’s my whole comedy technique. I know how to telegraph to the audience that this is a joke, and that if they don’t laugh right now they’re not playing the game.”

Show business itself was almost a game for Hope, or maybe a nineteenth hole. The breezy comic custom-tailored himself to radio after the labor-intensive vaudeville circuit: “Working in radio was wonderful,” he once reminisced. “You could just stand there in front of a radio audience, tell a joke, get a laugh, and then kiss the joke [off] and get another laugh. When the show was over, I’d just walk out, toss the script in a wastebasket, and go right to the golf course. I didn’t have to worry about makeup, costumes, or anything like that.”

Larry Gelbart has many pleasant memories of working for Hope, often at close range for long periods on trips to hospitals and bases,
earning seventy-five dollars a week. "He was a funny man and I laughed at him constantly," said Gelbart, whose experiences traveling with Hope through Korea provided the source material for Gelbart's M*A*S*H. "I never felt exploited or put upon by him. He never called me in the middle of the night for jokes." He vividly recalled once running a sketch past Hope while one of the star's mistresses sat nearby making negative remarks until Hope was convinced the piece needed rewriting.

Hope liked to brag: "I had the best staff of writers in the business, all young kids right out of college"—another of whom was Sherwood Schwartz, who spent the first half of his career in radio, where he broke in with Hope during the show's second year. Schwartz wrote for half a dozen major radio and TV shows before creating The Brady Bunch and Gilligan's Island, not to mention I Married Joan and Mr. Ed.

Of his former boss, Sherwood Schwartz remarks, "One thing I remember is, he'd never do a joke about his mother-in-law. He liked his mother-in-law. And for some reason, he liked jokes where people were standing on each other's shoulders. Bob liked to do jokes that were familiar to him, especially about whatever female star was hot at the time." It was just such narrow specifications, however, that caused Schwartz to leave the show after the war. "Writing for Hope was a dead-end street for creativity. Unless you fit the form, you couldn't do fresh ideas. But it was terrific training. I learned not to use superfluous words—how to take a joke and reduce it to its irreducible minimum. Tight! Tight! Tight!" The typical monologue, Schwartz continues, had about sixteen jokes, "and no joke could be more than two lines long. For instance, if the joke involved a car you'd never say 'blue Cadillac,' because blue isn't necessary to the joke. You avoided anything that would detract from the main subject of the joke."

Hope's radio ratings fell nearly as rapidly as Fred Allen's, diving from 23.8 in 1949 to just over half that, 12.7, in 1951, and by 1953 he was down to 5.4. Pepsodent jumped ship. Finally, with TV looming and in a last-ditch attempt to hold on to his radio audience in 1953, he began a curious daily half-hour après-breakfast show for Jell-O at 9:30 A.M., along with his weekly half-hour show, until, inevitably, he drifted into TV. Like Jack Benny, Hope approached TV cautiously, but he made the transition in 1949 more easily than most radio comedians.

Since he was already a film star, the cameras didn't worry him, although three cameras on a set annoyed him ("It's like trying to do a nightclub act with three waiters with trays walking in front of you every time you reach the punch line"). What worried him was that TV would steal time from his twin passions of golf and girls. Also, writers had to learn how to create sight as well as sound gags, which meant that he had to devise shows built around sketches, not just deliver a joke-crammed monologue. Paramount tried to delay his entrance into TV, fearing that it would cut into his big-screen audience.

Hope stayed on radio as long as he could, but his exit was hustled along when he opened the 1950 radio season on Tuesday nights opposite a man later nicknamed "Mr. Tuesday Night"—Milton Berle in his new and, as it turned out, milestone TV show, The Texaco Star Theater. Berle moved as many TV sets out of stores as Amos 'n' Andy had sold radios twenty years before, leaving much carnage in his path. What finally pushed Hope into TV was money: an offer from Frigidaire to do eight $50,000 specials a year—in addition to his weekly radio show.

Out of radio, too, grew Hope's fabled tours of GI camps, the live remotes from everywhere, which established him as not just the gung-ho all-American wise guy but as a patriot and tireless globe-trotting ambassador of good cheer. From there, it was only a shuffle step to immortality, but Hope never quite left behind the stage roots that accounted for his need to go on entertaining after he turned ninety, by which time, sadly, he had become a comic robot. As an old-time comedy writer observed: "People forget that Bob originally was a small-time vaudevillian. Despite his later success, I think somewhere inside him he still feels like a small-time vaudeville hoofer who got lucky."