**Wise Guys Finish First** • 123

Morgan took no prisoners. By 1947, a year after he went network, radio comedy was on its last legs and had nothing to lose by unloosing anarchic spirits like Morgan and Bob and Ray, who helped put what was left of radio out of its misery. Executives stopped meddling so much and ad libs were almost encouraged—anything to raise comic spirits from the grave. A typically devastating Morgan parody of quiz shows called “Take It, for Heaven’s Sake, Take It” features a manically laughing announcer (“I have a lady in the balcony—but you should have seen the one who got away!”) and an MC who fawns over semiretarded contestants as audiences applaud everything, especially anyone who mentions Brooklyn. Radio quiz shows were sitting ducks, but Morgan’s satire has a decidedly hostile edge to it; at one point, he shoots a contestant for not knowing the capital of the United States.

In his tossed-off 1994 memoir, Here’s Morgan!, published the year before he died, Morgan explained his comic modus operandi: “I couldn’t abide reading the junk the clients provided so I ad-libbed them in a kind of breezy, off-handed fashion that sometimes bordered on the insulting.” But nearly everything he said sounded like an insult. Morgan’s autobiography, like his shows and indeed his whole career, is a series of cranky mutterings in which he devotes more space to a trip to Bangkok than to his career in radio, as if radio were something he’d just as soon forget. He lived a throwaway life, spent largely at celebrity saloons like Toots Shor’s, Bleek’s, the Absinthe House, the Barberry Room, and Sardi’s, before fading away in middle age. Arnold Stang says, “He was a masochist, a neurotic man. When things were going well for him, he would do something to destroy himself. He just couldn’t deal with success. He’d had an unhappy childhood that warped him a little and gave him a sour outlook on life. He had no close friends.” Stang says that Morgan finally fled to Canada to escape his first wife, who kept him deeply in debt and refused to give him a divorce. Even so, Stang adds, Morgan was “very ambitious,” although he spent little time furthering his catch-as-catch-can career, in which he would walk out on shows—he once quit his TV show in midseason and went to Europe, says Stang—or go out of his way to insult sponsors to their face. Stang recalls that Morgan once threw Lee Myers, the head of Bristol-Myers, out of the studio. “If you’re trying to commit suicide,
that’s a good way,” says Stang. If Fred Allen bit the hand that fed him, Henry Morgan tried to bite off the whole arm.

On his NBC Henry Morgan Show (which also included Art Carney, Pert Kelton, and Betty Garde), Morgan didn’t just fondly rag his sponsors but took them on aggressively, making them the butt of his humor. The comic commercials are more clever than the surrounding sketches; his innate antagonism toward sponsors’ stupid claims and insipid writing inspired him to comic highs. He insisted that Life Savers cheated people by not filling in the holes in the center, and he supposedly incensed the founder of his sponsor, Adler Elevator Shoes, until Adler realized everyone was talking about Morgan’s anticommercials, in one of which he cracked, “You might like them, but I wouldn’t wear them to a dogfight.” After Adler came on to defend his shoes, Morgan apologized, “You’re right, Mr. Adler. I would wear them to a dogfight.”

Morgan wrote, in defense, “When they started with me they had two stores and inside of a year they had fourteen. Something happened then that I don’t think has happened since, either on radio or TV, viz., the audience paid attention to the commercials.” In one commercial for—or, rather, against—Eversharp’s Schick, Morgan tells, in a booming March of Time voice, of several men who, because they saved time using a Schick injector razor, came to bad ends: One man arrived early for a train and had time to read the paper, which made him so angry he toppled onto the tracks and was killed; another fellow came downstairs too soon and caught his wife on the couch with the ice man. After a shave-a-thon, the winner is asked how his face feels; “Bloody,” he says. It’s amazing the sponsors put up with it as long as they did.

Morgan was a total original, maybe too obstinately so—“swellheaded,” an ex-owner of WMCA remembered him. He took pride in coming to work late and in being fired a lot, as if being fired were a comic badge of honor. He twitted weather reports with forecasts, predicting “Muggy, followed by Tuggy, Weggy, Thurgy, and Frigy,” and “Dark clouds, followed by silver linings,” and “Snow, followed by little boys with sleds.” At his best, he was a man inspired: On an early show in Duluth he played Chinese music and sang along, put on sound effects records (especially car crashes), and interviewed himself in various dialects for a man-in-the-street interview, because, he explained, during winter there are no men on the street in Duluth.

This sort of glorious nonsense, first heard in New York City on WOR in 1940 (described by Morgan as “a sprightly farrago interrupted every few minutes by snatches of slightly cuckoo phonograph records”), quickly attracted a local following that included Robert Benchley (later his drinking pal), James Thurber, and Fred Allen, who tried to browbeat NBC into giving Morgan a network show. He finally got an unsponsored network show in 1945 on ABC, where it followed Allen’s, and went on the air with this announcement: “The Henry Morgan Show, sponsored by [pause] The Fred Allen Show!” That show lasted three years, then switched from ABC to NBC for Camels and Bristol-Myers, just as radio was beginning its decline. With Allen gone by the end of 1949, Morgan had most of the satirical field to himself, but his scorched-earth policy burned him up.

Born Henry Lerner von Ost, a wealthy banker’s son, and cousin of the lyricist Alan Jay Lerner, Morgan had come up through the ranks—studio page, announcer, and band-remote announcer. At one point, part of his job had been to fill in for announcer Norman Brokenshire, a prominent drinker who occasionally, reported Morgan, “forgot to leave the bar at 21 in time to announce his own program.” To keep awake between tunes at WOR, he began amusing himself with ad libs that failed to amuse all the stations along the network. WOR gave him a fifteen-minute show buried on Saturday morning that he found himself better at winging than writing. He made wisecracks between wacky records (Spike Jones, mainly) once a week, which spread to three times and then to six days a week, though he was still listed and paid as a staff announcer—the youngest in the country, he maintained.

On his first WOR show, Morgan included an intermission for listeners to diaper the baby, a bagpipe serenade of “The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze,” and an overdue tribute to the shirt-makers of America. Listeners loved Morgan’s sarcastic, disgusted, don’t-give-a-damn attitude, so different from most jolly, upbeat radio comedians. He was briefly blacklisted, due to his ex-wife’s left-wing associations, but disarmed the House Committee on Un-American Activities in the 1950s, then reemerged yet again on a midnight-to-3 A.M. show from Hutton’s, a New York restaurant. In the 1980s, Morgan was brought back by WOR to host an interview show, and on WNEW he had his last hurrah—or, rather, Bronx cheer.
Morgan spent the last thirty years of his life in semi-retirement, wasting away on TV panel shows like *I've Got a Secret* (“You try to be funny on those, you’re dead.”). He attempted a short-lived TV talent-scout sendup, an early *Gong Show*, where he presented a man who tap-danced on Jell-O, a lady woodchopping champ, and a farmer who played the castanets by flexing his biceps. Barely contained by radio, he was far too free a spirit for TV.

Mostly, Henry Morgan was a victim of bad timing, a transition figure in radio who was simply too acerbic for the generally amiable post-war era—“one of the few really outspoken people in radio,” he wrote in his memoirs. “I grew up thinking it was American to be outspoken. I’ve since learned it’s un-American. If I was bringing up a kid today, I’d teach him to nod.”

**By any rational measure,** Bob and Ray should have been washed up along with the rest of radio in the 1950s, but they hung on until Ray’s death in 1990, ending a partnership of almost half a century. In various formats, and rarely sponsored, the pair were at once anachronistic and contemporary, finding new ways to mock a medium whose original satirical targets had long since surrendered or died and gone to radio heaven.

Bob and Ray’s comedy transcended time and radio. It hardly seems to matter that *Anxiety!* was a send-up of *Suspense*, a show twenty years earlier, because it was enough like TV’s *Amazing Stories* and other current spook shows. Their parodies were generic enough to span generations. A specific show may have expired, but its TV counterpart lingers on; melodramatic dialogue, clueless characters, and wheezing dramatic devices are ageless. In an appreciation, Kurt Vonnegut wrote: “Their jokes turn out to be universal, although deeply rooted in old-time radio, because so much of life presents itself as the same dilemma: how to seem lusty and purposeful when less than nothing is going on.”

Robert Brackett Elliott and Raymond Walter Goulding were true radio offspring whose entire career consisted of mocking radio in all of its vast, unending inanities and banalities. Their work was never done. They just followed their ears wherever they led them—from “Jack Headstrong, All-American American” to arrogant sportscaster Biff Burns (“This is Biff Burns saying until next time, This is Biff Burns saying, ‘So long’”) to mush-mouthed critic Webley Webster and mumbly farm reporter Dean Archer Armstead. Elliott once said, “Our original premise was that radio was too pompous.”

Bob and Ray debuted in 1946 as staffers on Boston’s WHDH, where Bob played records and Ray did the news in the morning, ad-libbing bits after the ball games and eventually creating their two-man repertory of bores, boors, dolts, jerks, nerds, and windbags. They had been hired at WHDH nearly simultaneously. “We found out almost instantly that we were on the same wavelength, and after the news, we’d bat it back and forth a little.” Their original ad-lib show, said Ray, “kept spreading, like a fungus.” Ray’s specialty was falsettos and gruff blowhards; Bob’s was nasal twerps and fatuous frauds. Bob’s classic befuddled newscaster was the ubiquitous Wally Ballou, or “—ly Ballou” as he was always known, coming in a split-second before his mike was live on the cut-in and introducing himself in a snuffy voice as “winner of over seven international diction awards.” Like all Bob and Ray people, Wally was always a beat out of sync.

Between routines they inserted equally hilarious commercials and special offers from “The Bob and Ray Overstocked Warehouse,” such as Chocolate Wobbles, chocolate Easter rabbits that had been stored too close to the heater, with a guarantee that each Wobbly had somewhere inside it a purple ribbon.

In 1951, they left Boston for New York and, through Ray’s older brother, were hired to fill in for Morey Amsterdam’s show, *The Gloom Dodgers*, after which they went network on NBC, moving to a rival network in the late 1950s with this cheeky introduction: “Bob Elliott and Ray Goulding present the CBS Radio Network.”

They created new parodies while revamping and refining their standbys, working half extemporaneously and half scripted; one staple, “Mary Backstage, Noble Wife” (their sendup of the radio serial *Mary Noble, Backstage Wife*) was usually ad-libbed. Although they began 90 percent unscripted in Boston, by the 1950s they would rough out ideas on tape before going on the air. Several of the routines were supplied by Tom Koch, a Mad writer.

Their influences were Fred Allen, *Vic and Sade*, and a 1930s satirical radio team, “Colonel Stoopnagel and Budd,” played by Frederick Chase Taylor and Budd Hulik. Bob was also a young fan of Raymond
Knight’s *KUKU Hour*, a show he would attend with his parents. Knight played Ambrose J. Weems, who ran a radio station and commented on events with a sidekick named Mrs. Pennyfeather. Knight did another show—*Wheatenville*, set in a small town—that was a major influence on Elliott. Later, he and Knight became friends, and Knight was hired by the team as a writer in the early 1950s. It was one of the few times they had ever used outside help for a crowded schedule that included two radio shows a day and a fifteen-minute TV show; Elliott wound up marrying Knight’s widow. John Crosby, the most influential radio and TV critic, gave the young team a rave that launched Bob and Ray nationally, at which point (1953) they began bouncing from network to network, station to station, and format to format for the next thirty-seven years. They were unusual for comedy teams in that neither half was a straight man, and like Henry Morgan, Jean Shepherd, and Stan Freberg, their satirical peers, they came of age in radio, not in vaudeville.

The two men, who seemed so inseparable that even some lifelong Bob and Ray devotees were unsure which was which, kept fine-tuning their parodies, retiring “Mary Backstayge” and their first soap sendup, “The Life and Loves of Linda Lovely,” replacing Mary with “Garrish Summit” and “The Gathering Dusk,” their masterly parodies of *Dynasty* and *Dallas*, doing in five minutes the work of more elaborate TV soap opera parodies like *Soap*, *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman*, or *Fresno*. “Garrish Summit”—which began, “There in stately splendor, far removed from the squalid village below, the beautiful people fight their petty battles over power and money”—was the story of the Murchfield clan, headed by stuffy but powerful grand-dame heiress Agatha Murchfield, whose fortune was founded on lead ingots. Her ne’er-do-well brother, Caldwell (whose entrance was invariably announced by Agatha, “Here comes my ne’er-do-well brother, Caldwell”), tried to wrest away her wealth with various nefarious schemes. Agatha was so rich that she sent her watch out twice a year to have it reset for Daylight Savings Time.

Bob and Ray took a sure, unhurried approach to the pomposities of nearly every radio life-form that stood before a microphone. They never translated very well to TV, yet their 1970 revue, *The Two and Only*, ran for five months on Broadway and later toured. In fact, they were superb comic actors who worked in a small circumference but whose funny, pliable faces—cartoons of the voices they lampooned—were also made to be viewed. Larry Josephson, who produced their Carnegie Hall concert in 1981 and their later NPR revival, says that despite their success they were insecure about their fame. “They never thought they’d fill Carnegie Hall, and I could’ve filled it three times over.”

Their acting was mostly vocal, but seated before the microphone, they suddenly would grow quite lively. *The New Yorker’s* Whitney Balliett, observing them at work at a U-shaped table in their WOR studio in New York, described the scene. Prior to the show, Ray would loosen his shoelaces as Bob chose the sound effects from a case; all the while, both of them were continually clearing their throats. “The moment [the show] started, Bob and Ray seemed to draw closer at their table and a bell of intense concentration descended over them.” Bob always sat to the right of Ray. “They became extremely active; they lifted their shoulders and eyebrows, kicked their feet, and swayed back and forth in their chairs. Their in-place motions suggested the furious twitchings of dreaming dogs. They also looked at one another steadily as they slipped in and out of various voices, and when they were finished the tension dissolved immediately in a barrage of throat-clearings.”

Kurt Vonnegut observed, “Bob and Ray, who could have looked like anything, looked as wistfully funny as they sounded, and secretly wise. Moreover, they seemed as unlikely a pair of pals as Laurel and Hardy. Ray was the big bluff. Bob was the smaller, more intellectual, more pessimistic, more easily disappointed one.” Their humor was too cerebral and surreal for the screen, large or small; Vonnegut compared their work to Dalí’s limp watches. “Bob and Ray’s humor,” said Andy Rooney, “isn’t like a joke that depends on remembering the last line. Their sketches are just as funny in the middle as they are at the end.”

Their satire was also Benchleyesque, gently cutting without turning crude or cruel, with an inherent civility nearly unknown now among satirists. Bob and Ray were quiet minimalist wits in an age of maximum farcical noise, and the more far-out or gross their rowdy comic colleagues grew, the less Bob and Ray seemed to notice—they were always true to themselves and to their private comic vision. In fact, the wackier the concept—the McPhee twins, who speak simultaneously; the dawdling spokesman for the Slow Talkers Association; the Komoda
Dragon expert who repeats what an interviewer has just asked; the owner of a cranberry processing plant who never heard of cranberry sauce—the more calm their approach. Somehow it all sounded not only unforced but improvised, which it originally was.

Revered is not too strong a term to describe their hold on a faithful following that stuck with them through thick and, mainly, thin, from five-minute sketches on NBC's Monitor in 1956, their national breakthrough, to a daily show for CBS in 1959 to a four-hour afternoon broadcast on WHN in New York in 1962. While the team never had a huge audience, they always seemed to catch on somewhere. As Andy Rooney observed: "A lot of people think, as I do, that they appreciate Bob and Ray more than anyone else does." Perhaps one reason they remained a cult hit is that they were ambivalent about their careers, according to Josephson: "They had to decide at some point whether to put up with all the showbiz bullshit or to be true to themselves, and they decided on the latter. They'd been screwed over by so many broadcasters."

Genuinely shy men (Goulding evaded most interviews), Elliott once said, "By the time we discovered we were introverts, it was too late to do anything about it." He also said that "maybe the secret of our success is that we emerge only every few years. We don't saturate the public, and new generations seem to keep discovering us." He surmised, "I guess we're the longest-running team on the air, or maybe even in show business." Goulding once said, "We've spent all these years trying to entertain each other. And that's a good way to earn a living." They rarely disagreed, and while they thought enough alike to finish each other's sentences, the men were never chummy.

The more of a blabbermouth radio became, the richer grew Bob and Ray's satire. One reason they're still funny, in an era of entertainment overload and high-tech dazzle, is that radio really never did die—it just became sillier and more self-imitative. It became television. The broadcast interview, Bob and Ray's basic format, grew even more prevalent as newscasts, talk shows, and mind-numbing experts flooded the airwaves with babble, playing deliciously into their hands.

In most Bob and Ray sketches, the obtuse meets the overblown, as on "Speaking Out," a phone-in opinion program ("I think the prince of Wales should be a civil service job"); the "Bob and Ray Mystery Tune" 

(winner receive eighteen dollars "in cash" plus a free breakfast at Rudy's House of Dry Toast); "Down the Byways," in search of small-town Americana (à la Charles Kuralt), whose host once visited "one of the last of the small-town gourmets"; "The Employment Office of the Air"; and "Mr. I-Know-Where-They-Are," who dug up long-forgotten nobodies such as rodeo star Tumbleweed Gargon or child film star Fat Baby Moxford. Their one dip into political humor was the browbeating Commissioner Carstairs, a takeoff on Senator Joseph McCarthy who popped up from time to time on "Mary Backstage."

Most takeoffs on commercials merely exaggerate, but Bob and Ray, masters of understatement, twitted commercials by deftly tweaking the language. They delivered earnest spids for Monongahela Metal Foundry ("Steel ingots cast with the housewife in mind"), Height Watchers International, and the Ketchfield Braids & Tassel Company ("The company that dares to stand behind its fringe for two full years"). For two years, they did a real commercial for Piel's Beer, playing Bert and Harry Piel, who drew more laughs than drafts of beer.

Bob Elliott (the short moon-faced one with the big baleful watery blue eyes, who played all the adenoidal characters, led by Wally Ballou) and Ray Goulding (the burly one with the shaggy eyebrows, the swoopy Julia Childish voice of "Mary McGoon" and other biddies as well as pompous captains of industry) were the last of radio's true wits. "Comedians" sounds too loud and obvious for their droll, low-key parodies that are so on the nose they're only a notch more idiotic than real radio. Bob and Ray's rubes and boobs, their gee-whiz scientists, smug reporters, and bloated businessmen, are radio versions of characters who might have stepped out of Sinclair Lewis or Ring Lardner.

The duo wore as well as any humorists can hope to, never turning angry, cruel, snide, bitter, or self-satisfied. They didn't bludgeon their targets to death; they kidded human folly and bombast without feeling a need to destroy their objects. They attacked everything with a feather, tickling subjects into submission as if encouraging their hapless cast of characters and listeners to return for more fun another day. Their final series aired on National Public Radio in 1990, just before Ray's death—not a bad run for a pair of low-budget satirists. Fifty years after Bob and Ray began in Boston, they're still contemporary and funny. Little has aged except their listeners.
While Will Rogers claimed to detest radio, calling it “that thing,” he had little reason to. Rogers was the sort of personality radio was made for. With his relaxed, shambling, cud-chewing style, Rogers endeared himself to listeners as he had on stage and in movies, where he played himself—a sort of country slicker.

Rogers’s homespun monologues and wry homilies needed no production values—no bells and whistles, no stick, funny hats, sidekicks, music, or even audience, although he maintained: “To have to line up there and try to get some laughs, I want to tell you it’s the toughest job I ever tackled.”

He mused aloud, as if extemporaneously, and listening to him was more like eavesdropping. He didn’t play to audiences the way most comics do. He was just a natural-born crowd pleaser who adapted without fuss to radio, just as he had gone from rope tricks to the Ziegfeld Follies to movies to newspaper columns, and then on to radio variety shows like The Eveready Hour, where he built his greatest constituency.

His political comments could have been declared off limits by the FCC, which banned political satire from the sacrosanct airwaves, but Rogers got around that by never submitting a script, claiming his remarks were spontaneous; the FCC looked the other way. It might have been dicey for the agency to censor a national hero who, at his death in 1935, had become perhaps radio’s most beloved personality, using nothing but his mind, his mouth, and a mike.

Rogers arrived on radio’s Gulf Show already a full-blown star from his touring years, on Broadway, and in movies, but it was radio that brought him to everybody all at once and cemented his stature, though he was to die only a few years into his radio career. He played the role of rube, the only part he ever really played, both on screen and on the air, an act that everyone was on to. Andy Rooney, TV’s desktop Will Rogers, has referred to Rogers’s “apparent averageness,” but adds, “He wasn’t. Everything he did was calculated. He gave the impression he was just a simple common man,” but his aw-shucks style was his public role, like a character out of Frank Capra.

Rogers, on the air and everywhere he spoke, personified the anti-intellectualism that America still harbors. Americans are suspicious of book learning, especially in their entertainers, and love to believe that great stars evolve from the people and, like Forrest Gump, are just nice folks who got lucky. But Rogers didn’t crawl out of the haystack one morning and start making incisive wisecracks. He pretended to hide his light under a bushel, one firmly planted by him very early.

What shone through everything he did, however, was his essential Americanness (he never let audiences forget he was one quarter Cherokee), his basic decency, and his horse sense. In no way was he common, but he had the common touch and appealed to America’s best instincts. His career timing was as perfect as his comic timing: Rogers entered radio in the middle of the turbulent twenties, for which he was a sober antidote. He then stood by during the Depression as the country’s conscience, a soothing headache tablet for the National Hangover, reminding America of its roots. He was a constant, a man whose mere presence cheered people up. When he died at fifty-six in a plane crash over Alaska, said Stephen Chodorov in his Will Rogers documentary, “it seemed like the passing of a president.”

Since talk was, and remains, radio’s essential element, a man like Alexander Woollcott was to the manner—or, in his case, mannered—born, the very opposite of Will Rogers’s rural storyteller.

Woollcott was the rare writer who actually gained in translation to radio, since he was a performer at heart who knew instinctively what emotional chords to strike over the air. His prose, like the man himself, was excessive and theatrical; his criticism, florid and ferocious—one of his many sobriquets was “Old Violets and Vitriol.” By turns effusive and fulminating, he gushed and bawled like a baby or attacked with a razor-edged bludgeon. Beyond his passions, he was a man of vast interests and curiosity (he once called himself “taster-at-large to the American public”), with a reporter’s nose for sniffing out lurid items and murder yarns, plus an actor’s ability to rattle off an anecdote with consummate skill. In life as in print, he was a self-created character and self-made star, and he took to the airwaves with an almost perverse glee.

His show, The Town Crier, began with a ringing bell and the bellow of announcer Paul Douglas crying, “Hear ye! Hear ye! Hear ye!” followed by the host’s understated greeting: “This is Woollcott speaking.” Owing to his girth and his need to switch eyeglasses on the air, he required a special microphone.
It might seem that an elitist like Woollcott was an unlikely radio star, but the flip side of this flowery, cape-wearing Wildean snob was his firmly held belief that, despite his shameless name-dropping, he was a man of the people. Perhaps it was merely another hue in his performer's coat of many colors, but Woollcott was a good enough actor to make audiences buy his populist pose, quite the opposite of his scathing print personality as withering cosmopolitan critic.

The weekly half-hour program on Mutual was a grab bag of opening-night reviews, book blurbs, theatrical news, scandal, trivia, murder yarns, and fanciful tales about World War I or life in America. Nothing was above or beneath him—his town crier's bell tolled for all, from the latest bon mot overheard at the Algonquin Round Table to a bit of fluff garnered from a small-town weekly. The great Kaufman and Hart play that he inspired, _The Man Who Came to Dinner_, captured his peculiar blend of precocious, lavender-scented self-involvement, mawkish sentimentality, scheming blackmailer, and generosity.

_The Town Crier_ made a household name out of a name that, prior to 1929, had been known mainly among New Yorkers as a smarty-pants spoiled brat. Woollcott wisely abandoned that persona over the air, where he became more of an avuncular fellow, like a man seated before a crackling hearth telling tales to his gathered family. His unlikely network sponsor, Cream of Wheat, warned him against "off-color stories," and the head of the company almost canceled its sponsorship over the word _pubescent_, which some listeners were convinced was dirty.

Whereas in person or in print he could be patronizing, on the air Woollcott assumed the cozy personality of part village gossip and part kindly professor, referring to listeners as "my children" and "my dears"—spoken partly in irony, for Woollcott, a transvestite, was not only childless but said to be virtually sexless. He even adopted a flatter midwestern accent on the air, quite unlike his more distinguished, higher-pitched theatrical voice (one writer said he sounded like a man with "truffles on his tonsils"), as he read from Shakespeare or recited the Twenty-third Psalm for some dying old lady, told ghost and Christmas stories, delivered jokes, discussed language, history, and gothic mysteries (a particular Woollcottian obsession), and promoted favorite performers and new faces with equal fervor.

Woollcott was a one-man show who cast his web wide enough to dragoon friends and colleagues from the worlds of theater, literature, society, politics, and films, all of whom considered an invitation to share his microphone an honor. He dropped names in his gabby reports on the Great White Way, but he later produced them in the studio. For anybody on Broadway, at the mercy of Woollcott's whim as _New York Times_ drama critic, a request to appear alongside Woollcott amounted to a command performance. At the show's peak, six million people tuned in each week. "I saw in him a unique personality," CBS's William Paley said in explaining his unlikely, not to say risky, choice for a national town crier. "He had a quality I felt would appeal to a mass audience." It was like hiring Truman Capote to host a prime-time talk show.

His radio show began on WOR in New York in 1929, joined CBS four years later, and lasted until his death in 1943, when he was earning $3,500 a show. He died a few days after a broadcast on which he suffered a massive heart attack during a round-table book discussion and scrawled _I AM SICK_ on a piece of paper. One of the guests, the mystery author Rex Stout, later said he knew it was serious because otherwise the persnickety Woollcott would have written _I AM ILL_.

Radio's most memorable shows usually possessed a unique element that broke the mold and raised them above their rivals—a creative leap of faith that contradicted the genre or the medium itself. In most cases, once the mold had been broken, it resumed its former shape. With Jack Benny, it was the idea of a show within and about the show; with _The Lone Ranger_, it was the notion of a lawman in an outlaw's mask; with _Dragnet_, it was a show about the mundane day-to-day life of a cop. And with the _Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy Show_, it was the audacious, preposterous, silly, semisurreal concept of a ventriloquist headlining a radio show. It sounds impossible, almost a joke, a sure recipe for disaster—and it was indeed an avant-garde conceit—but what Bergen must have shrewdly realized or soon discovered is that what mattered wasn't the ventriloquist, or even his dummy, but what went on between them: the banter and their relationship, of a boy and his father, which gave it a familial feeling.

The patter on the Bergen-McCarthy show remains funny today, among the wittiest of all the major comedy shows, on a level with Jack Benny, Fred Allen, and Burns and Allen. In fact, Bergen and McCarthy
outlasted them all in radio, with a twenty-year-run that ended only in 1956, when the improbable team held the melancholy distinction of being radio’s last major comedy stars without their own TV show.

Part of what gave his radio show its special spin was Bergen’s constant mocking of his own ineptitude, which became the show’s favorite running gag and subtly elevated the act. Listeners delighted in such self-deprecating and self-referential comedy. Indeed, self-deprecation is the trait that links Benny, Bergen, and Hope, although Benny’s and Hope’s self-mocking was more complex, always at war with their boastful airs. Bergen’s civility and modesty, his gentlemanliness, were the perfect counterpoint for Charlie’s scheming wisenheimer.

Once you saw Bergen away from radio—in a movie or on a stage—you realized what a lousy ventriloquist he truly was, but radio allowed studio audiences to concentrate on the jokes without being distracted by his ventriloquist’s skills or lack of same. Even so, he made personal appearances to establish the visual reality of the bratty McCarthy character, a dummy who is (1) not dumb or endearing at all and who is (2) dressed inexplicably in a tuxedo and wears a monocle. One might have well wondered why a smart-mouth street kid was done up like a diplomat, totally at odds with his impudent Irish personality.

Bergen’s most amazing illusion was to turn a puppet into a lifelike personality, with all the characteristics of a real comedian and the ego of a living celebrity. Thanks to radio’s illusionary powers, it didn’t matter that he was carved of wood, for Charlie had the aura of a human being and the fame of a major star. There were said to be listeners—maybe some of the same ones who fell for Orson Welles’s Martian landing in New Jersey—who thought Charlie McCarthy was a real person. In her autobiography, Knock Wood, Candice Bergen observes that her father treated Charlie like a human being, as in those movies (The Great Gabbo, etc.) in which a dummy comes to life or takes on the persona of his creator. In rehearsals, recalls the writer Carroll Carroll, it was always Bergen who blew his lines, never Charlie.

Charlie’s good-natured lamenbrain pal, Mortimer Snerd, who came along in 1939, was much more your traditional dummy—quite literally so. In creating Snerd (whose inspired name is a likely derivation of nerd), Bergen went the other way, creating the dumbest dummy who ever was, in counterpoint to the quick-witted Charlie. Mortimer func-

tioned much like Gracie Allen’s character—a seeming dope whose inside-out logic makes sense. Bergen’s widow, Frances, claimed that Snerd was his favorite creation. “There was a sweetness about him,” she said. “Edgar used to say that Mortimer was stupid but that he had an advantage over most of us because he knew he was stupid.”

A typical exchange between Mortimer and announcer Don Ameche reveals how sharply written the shows were:

Ameche: Everyone has the impression around here that you’re ignorant.
Snerd: Awwww, you’re just sayin’ that to make me feel good.
Ameche: Mortimer, don’t you want to be somebody?
Snerd: I am somebody.
Ameche: In order to go anywhere, you’ve got to buckle down and put your shoulder to the wheel.
Snerd: Uh-huh, which wheel?
Ameche: Any wheel!
Snerd: Which shoulder?
Ameche: Let’s put it this way—look at Abraham Lincoln.
Snerd: Uh-huh, where’s he sittin’?
Ameche: When he was a boy, Abe Lincoln used to split rails.
Snerd: So what? When I was a boy, I used to break windows.
Ameche: And there was another boy in Philadelphia who discovered electricity. Can you tell me what his name was?
Snerd: It was, um, uh-huh, Mister uh... I know his last name begins with a capital.
Ameche: Concentrate!
Snerd: Yup, that’s it! No, it’s a shorter name than that.
Ameche: I’ll see you again sometime, Mortimer.
Snerd: And then some other time I can see you. If we change off like that we won’t get so sick of each other’s company.

Bergen always treated Mortimer kindly but was forever taken aback by Charlie’s wicked cracks—yet the shy, polite, erudite Bergen never tried to do verbal battle with Charlie, who treated “the old boy” with thinly veiled condescension, like many a modern child, sniping at him in asides to listeners. Bergen represented traditional values, decency,
courtesy, and the system, while Charlie laughed behind his back at his foolish old-fogy ways. Bergen did his best to reason with him and to engender some respect in the rude boy, playing benign Geppetto to Charlie's wayward Pinocchio. Indeed, the relationship between McCarthy and Bergen partly mirrored the classic Collodi fairy tale in that Bergen treated Charlie exactly as if he were "a real boy" (with a make-believe pal named Skinny Dugan), the main difference being that Charlie was disrespectful and unappreciative and had no desire to be anything other than what he was—a cocksure loudmouth who ogled girls and talked back to his father, or, in this case, father figure. It was unclear what the benign Bergen's precise role was. He lectured Charlie in a kindly, avuncular, schoolmasterly manner, with a soothing Scandinavian lilt in marked contrast to Charlie's high-pitched bray.

Bergen (born Edgar Bergreen) had worked his way up from tents and vaudeville to the Palace in 1930 and then to Manhattan nightclubs, where he became an unexpected hit. While performing at the Chez Paree, he was seen and touted by Noel Coward, who got him booked into the elegant Rainbow Room. With his saucy repartee, Bergen was the first entertainer to take ventriloquism uptown and out of the mouths of birthday party performers and two-bit vaudeville acts, the first one to make ventriloquism fit for adults.

Bergen described Charlie's metamorphosis from lowbrow street kid to high-hat sophisticate: "We were booked to play the Helen Morgan Club in New York and I didn't think a newsboy was quite the thing for a nightclub. I asked Esquire if I could make a dummy of their mascot, Esky. At first they thought it was a good idea but then they changed their minds... so there was nothing left for me to do but make Charlie the man about town, and that's how he got his top hat, monocle, and tails." In 1937 he was quickly snapped up by Rudy Vallee for his Fleischmann Hour show and became an instant hit, though Vallee nearly got cold feet at the last moment about booking a ventriloquist.

"Everyone looked down on ventriloquists," Bergen once recalled. "Vaudeville was dying and we thought we were through." He revamped the act for radio and became radio's most unlikely headliner.

Bergen got his own show almost at once, with Don Ameche and Dorothy Lamour, the first of various movie queens Charlie was forever in hot pursuit of. Mortimer joined the act two years later and, in 1944, Bergen added spinster Effie Klinker, his least successful puppet, maybe because her voice was a lot like Charlie's. Charlie and Mortimer were mouthpieces enough.

Charlie often went head-to-head with famous guest stars, most notably W. C. Fields, whose running gag on the show was to threaten to chop Charlie up for firewood, a gate-leg table, "a woodpecker's snack bar," or whatever woodsy insult Fields could imagine. Fields, who disliked everything about radio but the money, relished sparring with McCarthy because it gave him an opportunity to unload both barrels on a "child" who gave as good as he got. Charlie was in many ways Fields's nasty illegitimate son, and their periodic confrontations developed into yet another of radio's famous mock feuds.

Perhaps because Charlie was only a puppet, he could get away with more, but Bergen's mouth once got them both into trouble during a famous "Adam and Eve" sketch (written, oddly enough, by horror maven Arch Oboler), with Mae West as a wicked Eve who outsmarts the snake and seduces Adam (Don Ameche) with the promise of "forbidden applesauce" and other double entendres. The sketch resulted in letters from outraged listeners and decency groups, and a ban on further West radio appearances; NBC is said to have outlawed even the mention of her name on the air. What upset churchgoing listeners wasn't the biblical parody so much as the fact that it had the bad luck to air on a Sunday show.

Bergen, a taciturn man who had planned to be a doctor, was a loner, reserved and inexpressive; his daughter Candice called him "an emotional hermit." She writes that beneath his staid Scandinavian stock, he had a "renegade" seed that took root in Charlie. Bergen let the puppet do all the talking in interviews, both out of shyness and to preserve the illusion; at the start, he would only attend parties with Charlie on his arm—all that Bergen had to say he said through Charlie. He married late in life, at forty, living before then with his mother and his puppets. When the famous dolls were eventually joined by a live little girl, she recalled, "The sibling rivalry this established was certainly unique, considering I was the only child and the sibling was, in truth, my father." As a little girl trying to please a stern but adored parent, she longed to be up there performing with her daddy and grew to hate her famous "brother." She tells how she was forced to share a nursery with her
imaginary brother (the press invariably called her “Charlie’s sister”), who assumed life-size proportions in the Bergen home, with his own tiny bed and wardrobe.

The natural heir to Charlie’s crown was Jim Henson’s Kermit the Frog. Henson, a devotee of Bergen and McCarthy, dedicated *The Muppet Movie* to Bergen’s memory, and much of Kermit’s cocky persona, not to mention many inhabitants of *Sesame Street*, can be traced to Charlie and Mortimer, the Muppet clan’s spiritual ancestors. When Edgar and Charlie were guests on *Sesame Street* and arrived for rehearsals, recalled Bergen’s widow, the *Sesame Street* staff stood and stared in awe. “It was as if they were in church,” she said. Although puppets became TV’s first major stars—on shows such as *Kukla, Fran and Ollie, Time for Beany*, and *Howdy Doody*—they were kid-oriented; Charlie was too sophisticated for the peanut gallery of the 1950s’ afterschool TV.

When Bergen died in 1977, he was a largely forgotten celebrity who, in his daughter’s description, had grown bewildered, slightly senile, and “pulled into himself” more than ever. Even in his heyday, however, he would go off by himself in a private plane—wandering, like another famous Swede, to be alone. There was a meager attempt to revive his career on TV in a 1956 quiz show, modeled on *You Bet Your Life*, called *Do You Trust Your Wife?*, on which Bergen and Charlie bantered with contestants, like Groucho, but it lasted only a season. Bergen wasn’t much of an ad-libber. In his last live appearances, he would forget lines, but he came out of retirement for one final show at Caesars Palace, where he captivated the audience with his favorite radio routines and then, as if contented that he hadn’t lost it, died in his sleep at seventy-five, the day after the farewell run ended.

Charlie and Mortimer live on, not merely in memory but in their semihuman form, at the Smithsonian Institution. After Bergen’s death, the family found three old Charlie McCarthy heads in his safe—the original redheaded one from his tent-show days, one with an angrier face and, in a lovely Dorian Gray touch, a third wooden head with an aging Charlie wearing a fringe of silver hair.