

BURNS & ALLEN

Nonsense

Program Guide by Ivan G. Shreve, Jr.

“My belief is that a lot of show-business marriages go on the rocks because the man and woman are in competition rather than in partnership,” mused comedian George Burns in his 1955 biography, *I Love Her, That's Why*. “With us, it’s very simple: Gracie takes the lead on-stage; I take it, off. We both have our own departments. She stays in hers, and I’m into everybody’s. Gracie’s has always been the greater acting talent; she is the star, but you’d never know it.”

From the moment he was the recipient of pennies thrown at him by passersby while he harmonized with his fellow candy shop employees, young Nathan Birnbaum (born in NYC in 1896) knew that he wanted to be in show business. He was seven years old at the time, and would turn that “paying gig” into a series of engagements performing on street corners and in saloons. Burns and his musical aggregation called themselves “The Pee Wee Quartet,” and the comedian later

joked: “We’d put our hats down for donations. Sometimes the customers threw something in the hats. Sometimes they took something out of the hats. Sometimes they took the hats.”



By the time he got serious about a performing career, Birnbaum changed his name to George Burns. His early years in vaudeville were distinguished more by determination rather than any overnight fame. When it came to the stage, George was a jack-of-all-trades: he sang, he danced...he even performed at one time with a seal. Burns would experience a small

modicum of success while partnered with a man named Billy Lorraine...but when that association came to an end in 1922, George had to look for a new collaborator. At a vaudeville show in New Jersey, he was intrigued by a girl who had showed up that evening to see one of her roommates perform.

That girl was born Grace Ethel Cecile Rosalie Allen in San Francisco in 1895. Gracie Allen began her career in vaudeville on the West Coast in an act with her three sisters. When she struck out on her own, she used her terpsichorean talents and beautiful singing voice to find work in various stage troupes. She went on to work for Larry Reilly as a dancer...until the two had a falling out in a dispute over billing. (The act was “Larry Reilly and Company.” Gracie was “and Company.”) She was giving serious consideration to getting out of the business completely and enrolling in secretarial school, but George convinced her to team up with him. The couple played their first engagement in Newark’s Hill Street theatre in 1923.

George originally designated himself as the comedian in the act -- wearing wide pants, a large bow tie, and a hat turned up in the front and back. Gracie was supposed to be the attractive straight woman. As the couple performed, Burns noticed that the audience laughed every time Gracie asked George a question...and reacted with stony silence when Burns gave the “funny” answers. George knew that the act wasn’t working, and made some adjustments. In 1955, he reminisced: “Before the next performance, I tore the act apart...gave Gracie all the jokes, and took the straight lines. It broke my heart, but I was young, and hungry, and not a dope. That night we were a hit.”

Audiences fell in love with Gracie, and it wasn’t long before her new partner fell for her charms as well. Unfortunately, Allen already had beau -- a songwriter-dancer named Benny Ryan. However, when Gracie underwent an emergency appendectomy in 1925, George flooded her hospital room with flowers. His thoughtfulness soon moved him up through the ranks of Gracie’s suitors. Burns gave her an ultimatum around Christmas of that same year: she had ten days to decide whether or not to marry him. Gracie said “yes” on the ninth day, and the couple were wed on January 7, 1926.



Gracie Allen and George Burns

The success of Burns and Allen’s vaudeville act can be chalked up to what George always described as “illogical logic.” Gracie played an attractive-but-dizzy woman whose nonsensical statements baffled her

partner. George later explained: “It makes sense, but it only made sense to Gracie.” The couple soon became one of vaudeville’s top acts, and eventually played at New York’s legendary Palace Theatre in 1931.

Vaudeville had entered a slow decline by this time, and George shrewdly guessed that if he and Gracie were to remain viable as headliners, they would have to establish a beachhead in radio. Burns and Allen were heard on the BBC for fifteen weeks while they toured England in 1931. Back in the United States, a guest appearance by Gracie on Eddie Cantor’s *Chase & Sanborn Hour* earned them an offer to appear regularly on *The Robert Burns Panatela Program*.

George recalled in *I Love Her, That’s Why* that their first appearance on the *Panatela Program* was not well received. A letter with sixty signatures from college students complaining about the addition of Burns and Allen to the program attracted the attention of John Reber, the top executive at the agency handling the show. He responded by saying, “George, when sixty people go to the trouble to tell you you’re awful, you must have *something*.” According to Burns: “Seven weeks later we received another letter from the sixty students saying they’d gotten used to us...in fact, they liked us.”

George and Gracie continued their association with the *Pantella Program* until 1933, when they started broadcasting for another cigar manufacturer on *The White Owl Program*. (Burns, who had been smoking cigars since the age of 14, no doubt enjoyed sampling the sponsor’s product.) It was at this juncture that the pair participated in a successful promotional stunt, in which Gracie became involved in a search for her “missing” brother. She appeared in newspaper photos (at Coney Island, on top of the Empire State Building, etc.), and turned up on radio series from soap operas to dramas, inquiring as to his whereabouts. The gag was not without its complications. Burns and Allen (whose show was on CBS) were booked to appear on Rudy Vallee’s *The Fleischmann Hour* (on rival NBC). They were ordered by NBC not to mention Gracie’s brother (for fear of luring the listening audience back to CBS). The story goes that Vallee picked up the wrong script and asked Gracie about her brother...causing the network to cut him off the air.

Throughout the 1930s, George Burns and Gracie Allen’s broadcasts were ranked among the top



Rudy Vallee



Gracie, George, and baby makes three.

comedy programs, and were sponsored by the likes of Campbell's, Grape Nuts, Chesterfield, and Hinds Honey and Almond Cream. By the time they were broadcasting for Hormel in the fall of 1940, their ratings were starting to slip. "[W]hen you have a sudden drop in your ratings of, say, eight or nine points, you don't worry," George recalled. "It means the President made a speech, or a new show came on, or something like that. But a gradual decline in points—that's murder. It means there's something the matter with your show."

Burns searched high and low for a remedy, asking many of his fellow comedians for their thoughts. The solution came to him in the middle of the night. Burns realized that he and Gracie were too old for the kind of jokes that they were doing on their show. The couple had been dependent on their "flirtation act" from back in their vaudeville days, but many in the radio audience knew that the Burnses were now married and had two growing children. George was convinced that if the format of the show was revamped—as a domestic situation comedy, with jokes about roasts in the oven and bills that needed paying—their radio fortunes would rise again. A sponsorship offer from the Swan Soap people in 1942 was a perfect opportunity to test George's theory. It worked like a charm.

George and Gracie sold a lot of Swan Soap between 1942 and 1945, and switched to hawking java with the *Maxwell House Coffee Time* in the fall of 1945. Their final radio season (1949-50) found them plugging Amm-i-dent toothpaste on CBS (having been lured away from NBC in the legendary "talent raids"). Their presence at CBS laid the groundwork for a successful transition to television in the fall of 1950.

The George Burns & Gracie Allen Show enjoyed an eight-year run on the small screen. Gracie, not George, made the decision to bring the series to a close in 1958. Gracie enjoyed her retirement, and George tried to soldier on with *The George Burns Show* the following year, which featured most of the principals from the earlier Burns and Allen show...except for Gracie. It was gone after one season.

Allen passed away in 1964. George mourned the loss of his wife and partner for many years, but did not hesitate to take over management of Gracie's

“department.” He showed off his fine comedy skills and underrated acting talent until his death in 1996 (winning a Best Supporting Actor Oscar for his role in 1975’s *The Sunshine Boys* in the process).

George and Gracie were at their best when they were on radio. This collection of sixteen vintage broadcasts demonstrates that, when it came to identifying and fixing what was broken, there was no finer comedy troubleshooter than George Burns. These programs from the Swan Soap period are not only hilarious, they allow top celebrities like Herbert Marshall and Charles Laughton to step out of their dramatic wheelhouse and participate wholeheartedly in the fun.

The following broadcasts of *The George Burns & Gracie Allen Show* originally aired in 1942 and 1943 on CBS for Lever Brothers (Swan Soap and Spry Shortening). Bill Goodwin is the announcer. The musical entertainment is provided by Paul Whiteman and his Orchestra (with vocalist Jimmy Cash), along with the vocal group Six Hits and a Miss. The supporting cast includes Elvia Allman (as Tootsie Sagwell), Bea Benaderet, Mel Blanc (as The Happy Postman), Arthur Q. Bryan, Hans Conried (as Nigel “Cueball” Bolingbroke), Joseph Kearns, Clarence Nash (as Herman the Duck), Frank Nelson, Paula Winslowe, and Will Wright.

CD 1A: “The Man From MGM” - November 3, 1942

George runs into an old pal and learns that he’s working for Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. He invites his old friend for dinner, which impresses Gracie a great deal...only Gracie doesn’t know that he’s a plumber. Jimmy Cash performs “Dearly Beloved,” and Six Hits and a Miss sing “(Praise the Lord and) Pass the Ammunition.” (Listen for the moment when announcer Bill Goodwin realizes that he’s lost a page of his script.)

CD 1B: “Hat Box Hostage”

- November 17, 1942

George only allows Gracie a budget of \$1.50 to buy the turkey for Thanksgiving...so she returns with a live bird! Jimmy Cash sings “When the Lights Go On Again (All Over the World),” and Six Hits and a Miss perform “I’m Getting Tired So I Can Sleep.”



Clarence Nash is heard as Herman the Duck



Eddie Cantor

CD 2A: “Hit By a Club” - November 24, 1942

Gracie and The Beverly Hills Uplift Society plan to invite Eddie Cantor’s wife Ida to join the club...and when George advises Eddie to give the Uplift women a wide berth, Eddie vows to show his friend who wears the pants in the family. Jimmy Cash performs “There Will Never Be Another You,” and Six Hits and a Miss sing “Daybreak.”

CD 2B: “Messy Mechanics” - December 1, 1942

It’s the first of December—and the start of gasoline rationing. George laments that he neglected to have the car’s motor overhauled, so Gracie persuades novice automobile mechanic Tootsie to help surprise her husband. Jimmy Cash sings “Lovely Lady,” and Six Hits and a Miss perform “This is the Army, Mr. Jones.”

CD 3A: “Being Neighborly” - December 8, 1942

George, Gracie, and Bill Goodwin scheme for a way to get acquainted with the Burnses’ neighbors. Gracie decides to throw a party—but it turns into the duller affair in the history of get-togethers. Jimmy Cash performs “I Sent a Letter to Santa,” and Six Hits and a Miss offer an arrangement of “When Johnny Comes Marching Home.”

CD 3B: “The Swami’s Predictions” - December 15, 1942

Gracie and Tootsie have lunch at a tearoom and have their fortunes told. The fortuneteller proclaims that a man with the initials “H.M.” will be coming into Tootsie’s life. Could it be guest star Herbert Marshall? Jimmy Cash sings “I Cared a Little Bit Less,” and Six Hits and a Miss perform “I Had the Craziest Dream.”

CD 4A: “King George” - January 26, 1943

A genealogy service reports that George is descended from a Scottish king! (The letter is from a “Professor Henning”—a reference to future Beverly Hillbillies creator Paul Henning, one of the show’s writers.) Jimmy Cash gives out with “Three Dreams,” and Six Hits and a Miss sing “Moonlight Becomes You.”

CD 4B: “Good Help Is Hard to Find” - February 2, 1943

Gracie’s hired Tootsie Sagwell to do the housekeeping! If George can’t find a suitable replacement, Tootsie will remain on the payroll. Jimmy Cash sings “Why Don’t You Fall in Love With Me,” Paul Whiteman and his orchestra do

an arrangement of “Brazil,” and Six Hits and a Miss perform “Hip Hip Hooray.”

CD 5A: “Cast Your Ballot” - February 9, 1943

Gracie is in the running to be elected president of the Beverly Hills Uplift Society. Can guest star Charles Laughton give her a hand as the celebrity speaker at the next meeting? Six Hits and a Miss swing out with “Rosie the Riveter.”



Charles Laughton

**CD 5B: “Huckleberry Bucket”
- February 23, 1943**

Fresh from their guest appearance on The Bob Burns Show from the previous week, George and Gracie play host to The Arkansas Traveler as they prepare to leave for New York and a USO tour. Zelda Swinely has followed Bob all the way from Arkansas to tie the knot with the comedian. While in the Big Apple, Gracie will appear at Carnegie Hall to perform her legendary “Concerto for Index Finger.” Jimmy Cash performs “Roseanne of Charing Cross,” and Six Hits and a Miss present “As Time Goes By.”

CD 6A: “Victory Garden” - March 30, 1943

Gracie is excited about planning the Burnses’ victory garden, but may be going a bit overboard. She’s transforming the household into the very picture of farm life! Paul Whiteman and the orchestra perform “That Old Black Magic,” and Jimmy Cash sings “(Can’t You Hear Me Calling) Caroline.”

CD 6B: “Big Jake” - April 6, 1943

Tootsie has joined a Lonely Hearts’ Club...and sent Wyoming rancher “Big Jake” a photograph of Gracie (instead of her own)! This desperate single gal presses her friend to continue the correspondence with the potential suitor. It doesn’t take long before George begins to suspect Gracie of infidelity.

CD 7A: “Guest: Claudette Colbert” - April 13, 1943

George and Gracie are in the attic, doing a little spring cleaning. A passage in George’s old school yearbook mentions his ambition to be a lawyer...and Gracie is convinced that she’s responsible for his failure to achieve that dream. Claudette Colbert makes a guest appearance on behalf of a war bond drive. Paul Whiteman and his orchestra entertain with “There’s a Harbor of Dreamboats,” while Jimmy Cash performs “I Never Mention Your Name.”

CD 7B: “Broke Uncle Hubert” - April 20, 1943

Gracie wants a new Easter outfit, so she’s going to go all out on the schmoozing to persuade George to buy her one. George initially says no...but then has second thoughts. To save face, he arranges for her to come into a \$50 legacy from her “Uncle Hubert.”



Mel Blanc is heard as
The Happy Postman

CD 8A: “Gracie Appears in Traffic Court”

- June 1, 1943

George explains to Gracie the importance of eating a hearty breakfast. Later, Gracie gets a parking ticket... but it’s her husband who’ll have all the aggravation.

CD 8B: “Shortage of Husbands” - September 7, 1943

The Happy Postman delivers a magazine to Gracie that contains an article about a “shortage” of husbands. In fact, there are three women for every man. Disturbed that she might lose George, Gracie arranges for two unattractive women to propose to her husband so he’ll turn them down. Jimmy Cash sings “People Will Say We’re in Love,” and the Swantet (accompanied by Felix Mills and His Orchestra) perform “Darktown Strutters’ Ball.”



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