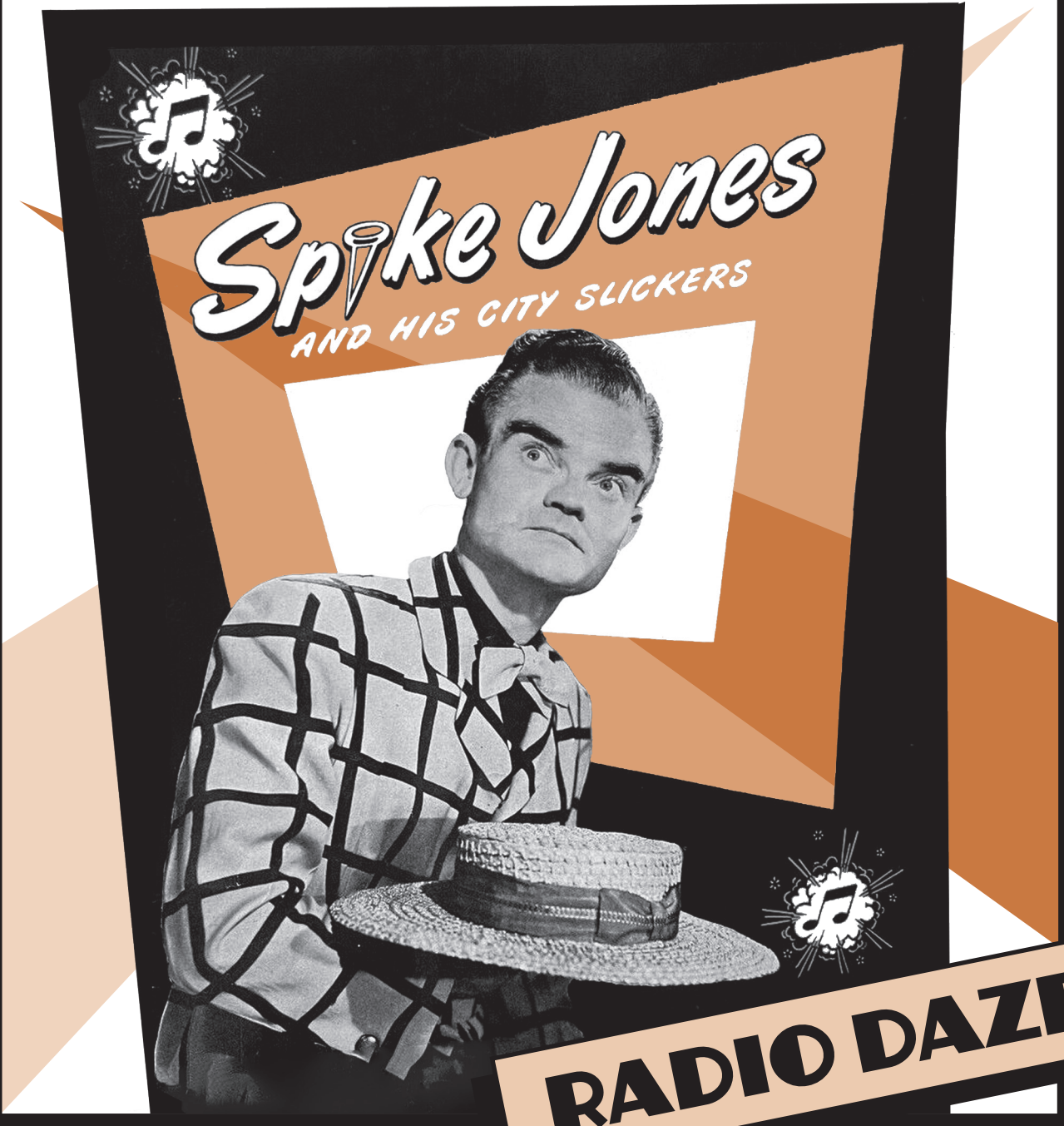


SPERDVAC SPOTLIGHT ON JAMES SCULLY • A TRIP DOWN AD-MAD AVENUE • RALPH EDWARDS AT T OR C, NM



Volume 48 • Number 2

November/December 2024



RADIO DAZE



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from the president

GREETINGS

and HAPPY HOLIDAYS fellow SPERDVAC members,

AS WE NEAR THE END OF ANOTHER YEAR, I suppose it's fitting to take a moment for some reflection. This time of year, as we gather with friends and family, we're reminded to give thanks for the blessings in our lives and to hold close to what we've lost. And if we're lucky, we might even feel a bit of

nostalgia. I can't help but look back at how much has changed in our world—at a pace that seems almost too fast to keep up with. When I was younger, I watched Captain Kirk

use his communicator to contact the Starship Enterprise. And now? Scientists are dialing up the space station with wireless phones. What's next—time travel?

In some ways, perhaps we are involved in a kind of time travel here at SPERDVAC. We work tirelessly to preserve the golden age of radio—a time we treasure, a time we want future audiences to experience. We hold back the hands of time, ensuring that these voices from the past aren't lost to it. And in this endeavor, SPERDVAC has been active for 50 years. That's no small feat.

That being said, so much has changed for our organization since our last in-person convention in 2019. The two most significant challenges have been rising costs and the availability of volunteers. Those of you who've attended our conventions know just how labor-intensive they are. We need talented, dedicated volunteers—talented, gifted volunteers who are sometimes hard to replace. And when those people are unavailable? Well, the alternative is to hire replacements, and we all know the problem with that.

Then there's the issue of costs. Food, lodging, transportation—everything has skyrocketed. The cumulative expenses of these conventions have reached a point at which we, as an organization, simply cannot cover the shortfalls between convention revenue and convention costs. That's why we've turned to crowdfunding to help fill the gap.

We all want the shared experience of an in-person convention. But if the present trends continue, reaching our funding goal would be a surprise—though a very welcome one. Trust me when I say we're listening to your feedback, and if we fall short, we'll adjust our approach. We're already considering a scaled-down event—one that would require much less funding but would still allow us to

come together, share the camaraderie, enjoy good food, and celebrate our love of classic radio. And we're actively working on securing sponsors to help cover the costs. So, let's stay hopeful—together, we'll make it happen.

I also want to thank all of you who have worked so hard and dedicated so many hours

In the first quarter of next year, we'll be testing a new audio server. This platform is designed to make accessing our archives easier and more user-friendly for all members.

to our fundraising campaign. Whether it's a “go” or “no go,” we are grateful for your effort. If you haven't had a chance to see the campaign yet, I highly recommend checking

it out. There's a clever connection between each radio star's image and the funding level they represent. See if you can make the connection. The campaign was designed by our very own board member Sean Dougherty, and I want to take a moment to thank him for his creativity and hard work.

Looking ahead to 2025, we've set our sights on several important goals. First and foremost, we will continue to focus on our archive, preservation, and restoration efforts. These are the heart and soul of our organization. Our collection of discs, tapes, and scripts is the very core of what SPERDVAC is, and the restoration of these assets is the final step in ensuring they're accessible to our members.

In the first quarter of next year, we'll be testing a new audio server. This platform is designed to make accessing our archives easier and more user-friendly for all members. We're also working to remove “metered” access and make these audio files a more open resource. I'll be sure to share more details as they become available.

On behalf of the entire board, our secretary, treasurer, and the esteemed editor of *Radiogram*, I want to wish you all a safe and happy holiday season. May your days be filled with warmth, joy, and the spirit of radio. We are so thankful for each and every one of you.

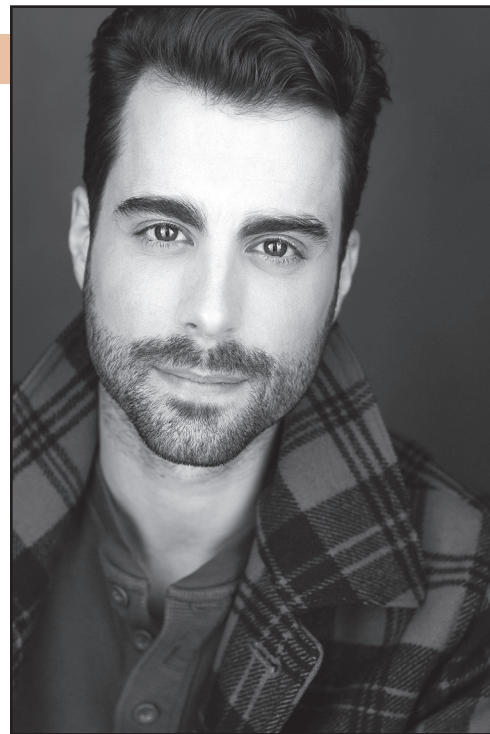
With all my best! 📻

Timothy Knofler



James Scully

by Sean Dougherty
SPERDVAC MEMBERSHIP CHAIR



THERE are so many SPERDVAC members with great stories to tell it was hard to pick a first subject—but on the other hand not so hard because James Scully is the host of *Breaking Walls*, the podcast on the history of US network radio broadcasting. He is also the writer/producer/director of the modern audio drama *Burning Gotham*, about New York City in the 1830s, and touches so many of those bases he's like a one-man example of all these activities. *Breaking Walls* started in 2014 as a broad topic podcast, but in 2018 it shifted to being exclusively documentaries about the history of broadcasting. We caught up with James in September 2024 and had him give us an update on what he's up to now.

Q. What are you up to now?

James: I'm actually going on a sort-of hiatus. For October, November, and December of 2024 I'm putting out playlists of shows to listen to rather than full documentaries. After 80 straight months of releasing documentaries, I needed a break. I've spent most of this calendar year focusing on things that have taken place in 1944 within *Breaking Walls* topics. Shows tend to either be about a person, like February of 1944 with Bob Hope, or a moment in time, like Christmas week 1947. I add world context to each show as well. For example, June was the 80th anniversary of D-Day so I did a 14-hour episode on the D-Day broadcast day.

Q. Conventional wisdom is that podcasts longer than two hours aren't getting listened to and you're dropping 14 hours?

James: Well, yeah. But keeping in mind that I release episodes in parts throughout the month, parts tend to be anywhere from 15 to 45 minutes long. During October, November and December of this coming year, I'm releasing playlists of episodes. So, for example, October is Halloween 1944. You'll get the written credit information, but it's a way to give myself a mini break.

Q. So a deserved rest then?

James: It'll allow me to kind of take a step back and say, okay, "how can I grow this further?" So that's where I'm currently at, but I'm already planning my 2025 episodes. I already know I'm coming back with a full-blown documentary for January, which is going to be on an episode of *Yours Truly Johnny Dollar* called "The Todd Matter." It's a relatively famous five-part *Dollar* serial because Radio Spirits released within a larger collection (Walter Cronkite Selects the 60 Greatest Radio Shows of

the 20th Century). This particular *Dollar* serial takes place in New York. It aired in January of 1956. So I'm going to cover New York happenings during the actual week that "The Todd Matter" was airing.

Q. What kind of audience feedback are you getting for these podcasts? Are you finding you're educating some new fans? Are people saying they didn't know something about a performer or a time period?

James: Yeah. I definitely get a lot of that because I do deeper dives than most people. As you know, there are lots of people older than you and I who are researchers in the field and they still know more than I do about certain things. I'm talking more about people who are collectors, as opposed to somebody like Dr. Joe Webb, who puts out lots of content. I'm making documentaries and putting media out, so I've in some ways become an unintentional public face for radio preservation.

Q. Do you think that we are losing cultural connectivity to that era? That the further we get from when those things were new, the harder it's going to be for a new fan to understand what's going on. Does your show help with that?

James: Absolutely. World War II is four generations ago and there's a lot of misinformation that gets thrown around. When you start going in and researching the news of the day, you start getting a clearer picture of what was really happening. For my upcoming episode on "The Todd Matter" from January 1956, I'll also talk about what's going on at that time for cultural connectivity. The more we understand what was going on during the McCarthy period, or what was going on during the depression, the more helpful it is to someone's appreciation of the

Welcome to a new feature of *Radiogram*, SPERDVAC MEMBER SPOTLIGHT. Each issue we'll highlight a member of SPERDVAC who is doing something exceptional in the classic radio / audio drama hobby, whether it is in research, preservation, re-creations, new audio dramas, writing and more.

listening experience of the show. We preserve classic films, we preserve television, and people study history. How many more books on World War II could possibly come out at this point? I don't know the answer, but more with new information are still being written. Yet for whatever reason, this one thing, "radio drama," we've just decided to discard its history and continuing cultural significance. It doesn't really make any sense. Some of those episodes of *Suspense*... if you sit somebody down in a dark room and put on "The House in Cypress Canyon," it's going to get to people just as much as it did in 1946 because it's good. It transcends time.

Q. What's the best way for new fans to jump into your podcast?

James: I've made a real effort to get the old episodes in playlists on my YouTube Channel. What I've found is that my YouTube audience is almost totally separate from the audience I'm seeing on Spotify and other podcast platforms. One of my current jobs is bringing that larger audience together.

Q. In the interview you did with Walden Hughes and Zac Eastman at last year's SPERDVAC virtual convention you said that podcasting had become your life. So let's talk about what that looks like a year later—what kind of life is that?

James: It's looking better for both myself and for the industry in general. Part of the reason for the hiatus is that I recently got hired by a company based in Los Angeles that makes audio dramas. Their business model is to create intellectual property and try to upsell it into a movie or TV show. At the moment, I'm doing all the post-production, audio engineering, audio editing and sound design for season two of a series. I can't say publicly what it is yet, but it's an ongoing series starring a very prominent Hollywood actor. Things are picking up a little bit and I think we are kind of emerging from the podcast media recession of 2023. I've spent more than 15 years now in some form of media and the media industry is always changing and

always figuring itself out.

Q. Let's talk about your original production as well.

James: I grew up in New York in a home with my mother, grandparents, great-grandparents, a great aunt and an uncle. I got a ton of oral New York City from my family. In the spring of 2018 I was already making documentaries on radio history. I realized that I want to create my own, original audio fiction

Some of those episodes of *Suspense*... if you sit somebody down in a dark room and put on "The House in Cypress Canyon," it's going to get to people just as much as it did in 1946 because it's good. It transcends time.

content, both for creative reasons and to own the copyright and potentially monetize it. I wanted to do A New York City period audio fiction show and I wasn't totally sure what to do. I'm a long-time listener of a show called *The Bowery Boys*. It's a New York City history podcast that's been ongoing since 2007. I got the idea for *Burning Gotham* from a Bowery Boys episode on The Great Fire of 1835, which burnt the whole financial District of Manhattan down to the ground. At the time I only had a rudimentary

knowledge of this Antebellum era. I spent four and a half years researching and developing the series with my writing partner Olga Lysenko. The United States in 1835 was an incredibly wild time—it's an era with the first generation of Americans. You're out of the Revolutionary period, but you're not yet at the Civil War. I wanted to write short 10-to-15-minute episodes to release them twice a week. In the vein of a classic soap opera serial. I self-funded the first eight episodes of the series, directing, writing, and playing the lead character, Aaron Columbus, which I released in 2022.

The series was selected by the Tribeca Film Festival as a 2022 Audio Selection, which is pretty hard to achieve. At this moment I'm sitting on 22 totally written episodes and story for roughly 15 more episodes after that. We'll get them into production once there is a funding mechanism to do so. So with luck that will be the next big project.

James, thanks so much for your time and we look forward to hearing more from you. Thanks for being a member of SPERDVAC. 🍷



James Scully, the writer, director and lead performer as Aaron Columbus in James' original audio drama *Burning Gotham*, first presented in 2022 and described as "the new audio fiction series about the fastest growing city in the world, and the opportunists who shaped it." You can follow James' original podcasts and productions at <https://www.youtube.com/@thewallbreakersllc>.



Pestering the Comics Peddling to the Kids

by Yolanda Day

IN RADIO'S EARLY YEARS (circa 1925) many in the industry were aghast at the idea of advertising on radio. A leading journalism trade paper of the day said that, "any attempt to make the radio an advertising medium . . . would prove positively offensive to great numbers of people." According to *Raised on Radio*, "the idea of advertising on the new medium was bemoaned by station owners, educators, and anyone who was repulsed by the notion of hawking goods over the air." Another trade paper of the day pictured the invasion of the family living room thus, "The family circle is not a public place, and advertising has no business intruding there unless it is invited."

Listeners, however, didn't actually seem to mind the ads because the price for listening to them was their favorite radio shows,

for free. Of course if they could have seen into the future listeners might have reacted differently. Just imagine being given the option to not hear advertising today unless you are inclined to issue an invitation into your living room!

WEAF in New York City was the first commercial station to sell advertising to sponsors and may have been the station which established the practice of naming the show for the sponsor, such as *The Eveready Hour*. Once that door was open it wasn't long before advertising controlled radio with ad agencies in New York and Chicago creating and producing programming. This shifting of responsibility let the networks off the hook for the expense of producing shows but led to some questionable advertising decisions with rules that were both rigid and ridiculous.

Mel Blanc's experience when he was performing on three shows with three different cigarette sponsors is a case in point. Mel reported that he was required to smoke the correct brand for each job. In their overzealous power play it apparently escaped the notice of the sponsors that this was radio!

On *The Phil Harris-Alice Faye Show* Harris frequently poked fun at the sponsor, Rexall and its long-suffering CEO Mr. Scott played by actor Gale Gordon. Mr. Scott was of the opinion that the philistine Harris should be paying Rexall to appear on the show and not the other way around. This type of banter was accepted as Rexall always managed to start and end the show with a serious Rexall commercial, narrated by the commanding voice of the "Rexall Family Druggist," played by veteran film supporting actor Griff Barnett, who intoned, "Good Health To All From Rexall."

The star who went head-to-head with the sponsor most often was Fred Allen. In order to placate ad agencies and their army of censors he had to cut from the script what he said was 50% of what he had written. Everything was taboo; including black heavyweight champion Joe Lewis calling Allen "Fred."

Allen considered the censors to be dishing out ridiculous constraints on his creativity. So he rebelled against them and tried to get away with as much as he could, a challenge he enjoyed. Some of their cuts and methods were indeed beyond logic. Censors scoured social registers, almanacs, maps and atlases to make sure that no real person or place existed which might draw objections to being mentioned on air in a humorous skit. A female network censor even suggested that Allen divulge "his sources of humor!"

Although Allen was forced to alter many of his scripts the sponsors could do nothing about the last-minute ad-libbing. Censors considered Fred Allen, Bing Crosby and Jack Benny loose cannons due to their frequent tendency to ad-lib.

Those three stars, however, may have been outdone by Henry Morgan on his NBC *Henry Morgan Show*. Morgan aggressively took on his sponsors often making them the butt of his jokes. He said that Life Savers cheated people by not filling in the hole in the middle and about Adler Elevator Shoes he said, "You

"Good health to all... from Rexall!"
-your announcer Bill Foreman-

Maxwell House Coffee Time is the program's title with George Burns and Gracie Allen as the program's leading stars in this September 4, 1947, advertisement.



Spike Jones

and his
MUSICAL DEPRECIATION REVUE



RADIO DAZE

by Jordan R. Young

ABOVE AND BEYOND ALL OTHER MEDIA, it was radio that enabled Spike Jones to carry out his unprecedented assault on popular music. Happily, it enabled one determined music maker to promote and market his offbeat product to a vast audience who could visualize his band in action. A gang of musical hooligans who could be heard but not seen was more fun to imagine in the years before TV obliterated the creative interaction between audience and performer.



“Radio was such a different medium, but we approached it almost like it was the stage,” asserted comedian Earl Bennett, alias Sir Frederick Gas. There was a lot of pressure, however, “because it was a one-shot thing. You had to get it right and make it funny, ‘cause if you died on the air you died; there was nothing to save it.”

The indefatigable leader of the City Slickers had logged perhaps 500 hours on America’s airwaves by the time his group became the house band on CBS’ *Arkansas Traveler*, on October 21, 1942. Twelve days later their own show, *Furlough Fun*, premiered on NBC’s West Coast stations. Though there was nothing remarkable about either show—at the time or in retrospect—Spike and company did double duty for two seasons, appearing on both programs through June 1944.

Arkansas Traveler, which moved to NBC early in 1943 as *The Bob Burns Show*, was a comedy-variety series built around the philosophical hillbilly image “Bazooka” Burns had cultivated on *Kraft Music Hall*. Jones’ cowbells

were right in tune. The program was broadcast live to the East Coast in the afternoon, followed by a later show for the West—a common practice before the advent of tape.

The Slickers made frequent guest appearances on *Kraft Music Hall* and other programs during the war. They were often part of the line-up on *Command Performance*, recorded at CBS for Armed Forces Radio Service and “presented this week and every week ‘til it’s over over there.” The shows—introduced by the likes of Cary Grant and Rita Hayworth—were never heard by the general public. “Those were the biggest thing we ever did,” recalled staff writer Eddie Brandt. “Five hundred celebrities tripping over each other.”

At the conclusion of the band’s USO tour in the fall of 1944, they appeared on BBC Radio in *The Chamber Music Society of Lower Regent Street*. The program was well-received, but the Slickers’ sense of decorum was not entirely the Brits’ cup of tea.

Jones’ special blend of music and chaos was more appreciated on the home front as the J.

“I went all the time. I went to Chicago when they were doing *The Coke Show* from there,” said Spike Jones’ eldest daughter, Linda, who has fond memories of sitting in the studio audience for her father’s popular radio show, broadcast on CBS from 1947 to 1949. She recalled her among favorite shows those guest-starring Lassie (“that was a big deal”), Frank Sinatra, and Kay Starr, when I asked her recently about the program.



Excerpted with permission of the author from *Spike Jones Off the Record: The Man Who Murdered Music*, now available in a revised and expanded 4th edition from bearmanormedia.com and Amazon. Also available from Amazon: *Spike Jones on LP, CD, MP3 & DVD: A Guide to the Essentials* by the author, in ebook and paperback; *The Spike Jones Show*, a new four-volume CD/Audiobook set from Blackstone, which includes 64 Jones radio shows first broadcast 1947-49.

Walter Thompson agency well knew when it enlisted him as a 1945 summer replacement for Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy on *The Chase and Sanborn Program*. “Why no one ever thought of Spike Jones with a properly developed script formula is still a Brill Building wonder,” *Billboard* observed shortly before the show debuted. “What Spike can do will be demonstrated this summer when he takes over for the woodenhead [McCarthy] spot,”

Armed with arrangements by Howard Gibeling, Jones augmented the band for the show. The City Slickers were well in evidence as a unit within the band, typically performing two numbers per program. However, they played second fiddle to headliner Frances Langford as well as the weekly guest star.

The NBC show was broadcast from a different California service hospital each Sunday, catering to an audience of “fellows from your hometown and mine.” Nearly all comedy programs followed the same pattern during World War II. But while the idea was patriotic, the shows were so heavily geared toward servicemen they almost always suffered as a result.

There was little rapport between Jones and Langford. Though Spike had backed the singer on a number of Decca records, Langford recalled that, “you didn’t have the time to get to know people in those days. I was traveling so much, I didn’t do that bit.” Langford, who would arrive the day of the show and do a quick rehearsal before the program, observed that, “The band played good music, but after you saw them once or twice, that was it. The audience liked it, but they only saw it once.”

By the time the series came to an end in late summer, Jones had reached a decision. He was tired of being someone else’s straightman. The bandleader desired to star in his own radio program when he was finished with the *Chase and Sanborn* gig, and he wanted to depart from the variety format. He and his manager, Ralph Wonders, met with a young

comedy writer named Charlie Isaacs in the fall of 1945 and discussed ideas for *The Spike Jones Show*.

The improbable result was a situation comedy which took place on the college campus of Subnormal Normal and in an adjacent malt shop. Spike would play a perennial sophomore, the proprietor of the malt shop; Carl Grayson was cast as a professor and Red Ingle as a big dumb football player with Ann Rutherford and Mabel Todd as coeds.

“We cut exposition to the bone,” said Isaacs. “You had to take what would be a well-developed scene . . . [then] suddenly you’re chopping like hell because you’re also trying to make room for music . . . and Spike wanted to talk funny, he wanted funny lines. It was like writing for Oscar Levant: he would keep yelling, ‘Give me more lines.’ I told Levant, ‘You’re doing a five-minute concerto.’ He said, ‘To hell with the concerto, I’ll have more jokes.’”

The audition show was broadcast on NBC in November 1945. Despite the success of *Kay Kyser’s College of Musical Knowledge*—the apparent inspiration—Jones’ pilot failed to make the grade with prospective sponsors. Isaacs, who went on to write for almost every comedian in Hollywood, recalled it as “a jokey-joke kind of show,” but not a fiasco. “I remember getting laughs,” he added. “Ralph and Spike were very happy afterwards; everybody seemed to like it. We were all very elated, because Spike was happy.”



Spike rehearsing for *The Spotlight Revue* (CBS 1947) with co-host Dorothy Shay, “the Park Avenue Hillbillie.”

Before long, Jones was back on the air. His Other Orchestra—early incarnations of which were heard on both *Furlough Fun* and *Chase and Sanborn*—was broadcast over West Coast network Mutual-Don Lee from the Trocadero nightclub throughout the spring of 1946. *Spike’s at the Troc* featured Jimmy Cassidy and Helen Grayco on vocals, offering tunes like “September Song” and “E-Bop-O-Lee-Bop” until they wore thin. When the union insisted his broadcasts were “commercial” and the sidemen had to be paid accordingly, Jones could no longer afford to indulge himself. Besides, it was a flop with the public.

Spike and his City Slickers resurfaced on radio 17 months after the Other Orchestra fiasco in the fall of 1947, as the stars of a CBS variety show better suited to them than their ill-fated sitcom. They shared the microphone with Columbia recording artist Dorothy Shay—the Florida-born “Park Avenue Hillbillie”—and the usual guest star, but the accent was on funny and the focus was on them.

The Spotlight Revue, sponsored by Coca Cola and informally dubbed *The Coke Show*, was packaged not by the sponsor or the ad agency as was then common but by Jones’ booking agency, the all-powerful Music Cor-



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— Eddie Brandt



Despite Jones' efforts, Doodles Weaver was the show's top laugh-getter. As Professor Feetlebaum, he delighted audiences by screwing up the words of romantic ballads ("When April showers . . . she never closes the curtain") and interpolated all manner of gibberish, non sequiturs and throwaway jokes.

poration of America. "MCA got Spike *The Coke Show*," stated Eddie Brandt. "That's why he left General Artists. They couldn't get him a radio show; they weren't strong enough. MCA owned their own shows in those days. They would have him, the writers; they owned everybody on the show."

The agency block-booked their own clients on the show but the contrivance was not uninspired in the case of Jones' co-star, who had found her forte singing novelty songs about mountain characters almost by chance. "Dorothy Shay was a perfect partner for Spike, added Brandt. "You couldn't get a better combination. Frances Langford was kind of aloof when we did *Chase and Sanborn*—like it was below her dignity. Shay was easier to get along with. We spent a lot of time with her and got to know her; she was more a part of the whole thing."

The show, which aired on Armed Forces Radio in an abbreviated version, was heard on Friday nights until January 1949. The series then moved to Sundays as the lead-in to *The*

Lucky Strike Program (i.e., *The Jack Benny Program*), after Benny was lured to CBS in the network's notorious talent raid on rival NBC. *Spotlight Revue* became *The Spike Jones Show* (sans Shay) and bolstered its ratings in the process.

The weekly event was unique by any name in that it traveled with the band, broadcast-ing from wherever *The Musical Depreciation Revue* was booked. "They'd work the dates like a wheel," explained clarinetist Jack Golly. "They'd go into, say, Chicago, and then the first week they'd go out to Wisconsin, and the second week to Michigan—and then they'd come back into Chicago for the radio show. After they covered all those states, then they'd maybe move to Atlanta, or they'd move out to Baltimore, and do it from those locations."

Because the schedule was dictated by the lucrative road show, getting the series on the air week after week called for substantially more advance planning than most broad- casts required. "The writers would be part of the advance crew," recalled saxophonist Eddie Metcalfe. "They'd set up, in Boston or Atlanta or wherever we were going to originate the show. They'd meet

with the guest star a day or two early. We'd start rehearsals for *The Coke Show* at 10 a.m. Sunday, and go right up to showtime; the show was done at 4 p.m. Eastern time. Then we'd come back at 8 or 8:30 and do the stage show."

"In the bigger cities, we'd do the radio show in a studio, where they had a seating capacity for an audience," said Golly. "You'd go to a smaller town—even Atlanta wasn't very big then, [and] Spike would have to do the show from the auditorium, where we did the *Musical Depreciation Revue*."

The October 3, 1947, premiere offered humorist Victor Borge, who savaged "Clair de Lune" on the piano, Doodles Weaver and his broken-down racehorse Feetlebaum, a pair of numbers by the Big Band—a throwback to the Other Orchestra—and two by Dorothy Shay. It also introduced the public at large to a new comedian named Spike Jones.

Writer-producer Hal Fimberg, who had written for Abbott and Costello's radio shows and films, gave Jones precious little to work with on paper. However, the bandleader saw the program from the outset as an unprecedented opportunity. As the show's emcee, he was entitled to deliver the punchlines on a weekly basis with Shay as his straight-woman. If Oscar Levant could be funny, so could Jones:

- Spike: Our clarinet player is making a fortune on something he invented. It's a clarinet shaped like a fish with a ladder on it.
- Dorothy: A clarinet shaped like a fish with a ladder on it?
- Spike: Sure, for musicians who like to run up the scale.
- Dorothy: That's silly. You should put your money into something practical.
- Spike: I have, Dorothy. Bubble gum. It's a growing business.

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- Dorothy: Spike Jones Bubble Gum. That sounds good.
- Spike: And my gum will have movie stars' pictures on it. Imagine, a guy blows a bubble and there's Lana Turner's face in front of his.
- Dorothy: What happens to Lana when the bubble bursts?
- Spike: She can't tear herself away from his lips.



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The jokes were better the second season with Eddie Maxwell and Eddie Brandt (who generally worked as a team) and Jay Sommers at the typewriters along with Henry Taylor of the Radio Rogues. Jones' material was carefully tailored: "Incidentally, if you noticed that last Sunday there was an instrument missing from my band, it really wasn't my fault. During rehearsal Jack Benny sneaked in from next door and stole my washboard to do Ronald Colman's laundry."

By this time writers for other comedians were returning the name-dropping favor knowing the reference was guaranteed to get a laugh. One night on *The Fred Allen Show*, after Senator Claghorn (Kenny Delmar) told Allen he was developing a giant magnet that would lift the Iron Curtain, Allen mused, "The senator had better be careful with that magnet. He'll pull Spike Jones off the air."

The writing sessions for Jones' radio program were "beyond description," according to Eddie Maxwell. "Luckily, we all got along together well, and Spike seemed to instill the same sense of his humor in all of us, so it was a ball. We had to fit the material to the guest stars, but we'd always make them the funny guys. They'd sometimes sit in with us, but rarely would you find any of them who were equipped to improve anything. Spike would always offer ideas and gags. If the show was good he participated in the credit; if the show was lousy, we heard about it."

The emergence of Spike as a funnyman was less a conceit than a public relations move. He projected that image moreso on radio than any other media. It was not an easy step for someone as microphone shy as Jones was, who had relied largely on comic Carl Grayson to announce the stage shows up until his departure from the band the year before.

"He was very shy and bashful," said his friend Gordon Schroeder.

The bandleader had no shortage of comedians in his organization at this point, notably Doodles Weaver, Freddy Morgan and Earl Bennett. But the program was simply too good

a vehicle for him to leave matters entirely in their capable hands.

"He always thought he could get so much out of a line," said Jack Golly. "And he was probably the least talented of anybody. The guys that were funny were Freddy and Gas. Hell, they'd walk on the stage and the crowd would start to laugh before they even said anything. Freddy was a genius when it came to dialect."

"Jones had a bit — it was going to be Freddy, myself and him," recalled Earl Bennett. "I knew it wasn't working, and I think way down in his guts he knew it wasn't working. I was so green and naïve, I said, 'You know, Spike, this'll be a lot funnier if you just let Freddy and I do it.' And he said, 'Gas, I'm the star.'"

"He had to put himself before the public," observed George Rock. "There was no point in him sitting back and letting someone else get all the kudos. He wanted people to think he had all the talent, and I guess he obviously did."

Despite Jones' efforts, Doodles Weaver was the show's top laugh-getter. As Professor Feetlebaum, he delighted audiences by screwing up the words of romantic ballads ("When April showers . . . she never closes the curtain") and interpolated all manner of gibberish, non sequiturs and throwaway jokes: "Speaking of birds, I was once arrested for feeding pigeons. Someone said, 'How can you

I was feeding them to my brother.'"

Weaver's commercials were among the goofball highlights of the show: "Open a bottle of Pootwaddle car polish, look inside you'll find a smaller can. Open the can, inside you'll find a smaller bottle . . . when you get down to nothing, that's Pootwaddle. Then you put it on your car, you don't have to rub it, you don't have to do anything, it just eats through the metal by itself . . ."

Music was as essential to *The Coke Show* as comedy. The City Slickers would get the program rolling with an old standard like, "Yes, Sir, That's My Baby" or "Way Down Yonder in New Orleans," played at breakneck speed. The openers were arranged by Jack Golly, who was featured with Dick Gardner on an assortment of woodwinds.

The City Slickers demonstrated their versatility by making up the core of the show's big band. Eddie Pripps, musical director of the stage *Revue*, conducted the orchestra and provided the bulk of the arrangements; he also traveled ahead of the unit, lining up talent to augment Jones' regular sidemen.

"We would add men wherever we were," recalled George Rock. "In New Orleans, we added Al Hirt on second trumpet; he was just a local trumpet player. We'd add two trumpets, two trombones, two saxophones; we had our own rhythm section." Former Slicker King Jackson and others were also employed



Spike and the City Slickers clowning with Jerry Colonna during rehearsals for the CBS program *The Coke Show*.

COURTESY OF TED HERNING



Will the real Peter Lorre please stand up? Spike with Paul Frees and the genuine article on *The Spotlight Revue* (CBS 1948).

"We had the big orchestra onstage, we'd play the opening theme; then during the announcement, we'd filter out the orchestra and come down to the Slicker setup," explained drummer Joe Siracusa. "We'd go to our opening number, then we'd go back to the big band and play for Frank Sinatra, or whoever the guest was. It's hard to realize now, but we were playing with the biggest stars in the business."

Fred Astaire, the Mills Brothers, Dorothy Lamour, Tony Martin, and Cyd Charisse (or "Squid Cherise," as Weaver joked in his diary) were among the brand names. The size of the budget in no way determined the magnitude of the guest list. "I think we paid \$800 for Peter Lorre, \$1000 for Sinatra, \$1500 maybe for Gene Kelly," said Eddie Brandt. "The whole show maybe had a \$,000 budget. All those big stars, they loved doing *The Spike Jones Show*. They all wanted to get into a City Slicker number with Spike."

Some were happier to be there than others. "Don Ameche was warm, friendly, all the guys in the band loved him," recalled Earl Bennett. "You just wanted to hug the guy he was so great, how he could relate to people, even if you were nothing but sidemen. As compared to, say, Marlene Dietrich, who acted like they'd asked her to walk hip-deep in human excrement by just being on stage with us."

Peter Lorre, whose film portrayals of vil-

lains and psychopaths obscured his gift for comedy, headlined one of the more memorable shows in the series. But mocking his image was business as usual for the gifted actor, who referred to his Hollywood career as "making faces" and nothing more. "We have a lot in common," he told Jones on the broadcast. "What you do to music, I do to people." Paul Frees reprised his imitation of Lorre singing "My Old Flame" after which Lorre tried to imitate Frees imitating him. After the show, he dryly told the impressionist: "You're too difficult to follow. I'm never going to work with you again."

While the emphasis in radio was necessarily on aural humor, the Slickers still put on a highly visual show. A great number of gags were pulled solely for the benefit of the studio audience. "If the situation called for pouring a glass of water on the stage, instead of a glass I'd take a five-gallon Sparkletts bottle and get water all over the place," said Siracusa, who served as sound effects man. "Everything had a visual impact—the clothes we wore, the instruments we played, the way it was executed. We had to be very careful, doing radio, to make use of the visual gags in the proper spots. If a guy walked in during a line, like Sir Frederick Gas with his wild hair or George Rock with his kiddie outfit, or Dick Morgan with his 'thirsty camel' face,

they'd disrupt the whole routine—so they had to time their entrances with the laughs. You can still hear surges of laughter on some of the shows, where somebody made an entrance during a line."

Eddie Brandt concurred. "A lot of our radio stuff, people must've wondered at home—what the hell was that big laugh? It would be a guy coming out in a wig or a girl's outfit. We did a lot of TV things on radio, but everybody did. There would be a five-minute laugh when Jack Benny warmed up his Maxwell; it was Mel Blanc doing all these crazy faces [for the studio audience] and nobody at home saw it."

As visual as the Slickers were, it was their aptitude for sound effects that captured Basil Rathbone's interest when he performed a parody of Prokofiev's "Peter and the Wolf" on Jones' program. The actor was treated to a special demonstration neither seen nor heard by the listening audience.

"Dick Morgan was a heavy eater, and naturally, sometimes he'd have gas," recalled Siracusa. "He could release the gas at the most opportune or inopportune times. Rathbone was on the show, and he was so impressed with all of us and the funny noises we made. So George Rock said, 'That's nothing. Go ahead, show him, Dick.' And Dick raised his leg and released a torrent on cue."

Coca Cola executives, who were not treated to Morgan's command performance, were displeased with the noise that *did* go out over the air. In the spring of 1949, the sponsor asked the band to "tone down" its raucous antics, which corporate officers apparently found inappropriate for their Sunday time slot.

"Spike vehemently refused to compromise," mused Eddie Metcalfe, who recalled that Jones was soon replaced with Percy Faith and his Orchestra.

The bandleader would no doubt like to have remained on the air, where he was drawing a healthy 29.7% share of the listening audience. But he was a bit too independent for a long-term relationship with the soft drink company.

"It was awfully hard for him to make a decision to accept a sponsor for his show," said Siracusa, "because he ordinarily did not like to tie himself down to one product or one sponsor . . . something you could not release yourself from to go on to something else."

Jones made dozens of guest appearances, with and without his bandsmen, on local and network radio shows throughout the 1940s



We'll be TorC and Take the Consequences

RADIO STUNTS occasionally resulted in long-term consequences. Take, for instance, the small town of Hot Springs, NM. Ralph Edwards, the creator and host of the popular weekly insanity known as *Truth or Consequences* wanted to commemorate the program's 10th anniversary on the air. The program had debuted on March 23, 1940, and Edwards wanted to celebrate in style. With time remaining on the calendar before the big event, Edwards began spreading the word. If any American town would agree to change its name to Truth or Consequences, Ralph Edwards would broadcast the show's anniversary special from the renamed location. The town would receive lots of publicity with the promise of ongoing exposure.

Hot Springs took Ralph Edwards at his word. Local interest began with the Hot Springs Chamber of Commerce. Changing the town's name to Truth or Consequences seemed an ideal means of bringing attention and publicity to the town of 8000. The local hot springs had long been touted as granting relief for crippling infirmities such as arthritis. The renaming would provide the town with national exposure and an influx of needed tourism. The city council went along with the idea and decided to place the issue on the ballot for the public to decide. The local newspaper, the *Hot Springs Herald*, threw its support behind the effort.

Public sentiment appeared to be solidly behind the proposal and the election was set for March 31, 1950. The election results seemed a foregone conclusion, so much so that detailed advanced plans were made for Edwards to broadcast his show from the newly re-christened town the following day, April Fool's Day.

Originally, there had been talk of changing the town's name for a single day and reverting to Hot Springs the next day. Indeed, Ralph Edwards had only advertised for a town willing to change its name for a period of 24 hours. However, after a little legal research it was pointed out that a second vote would be required for Hot Springs to change its name back. If the townspeople wanted to change the name of their municipality to Truth or Consequences, they would have to go Ralph Edwards one better and make the change permanent.

Hot Springs fell heir to a lot of national publicity leading up to the vote. Media wags wanted to know what name changes might come next if the precedent was set. Possibilities were freely tossed

out such as Life Can Be Beautiful, Texas, Take It Or Leave It, Arizona, John's Other Wife, Arkansas and Ma Perkins, New Mexico.

Ralph Edwards and his wife arrived in town the day before the election. Everything was in place to broadcast *Truth or Consequences* the radio program from the town of Truth or Consequences, NM. The only thing that needed to happen now was ratification by the

townspeople. A huge celebration had been planned and was already underway as votes were being cast.

Balloting confirmed what everyone expected; the name change passed overwhelmingly. The final tally was 1,294 in favor and 295 opposed. The only dissenting voice the media could find to quote was an 85-year-old prospector, R. E. Keiser, who roared, "Now who in thunderation can spell this Consequences thing anyway?"

The next night, Edwards presided as emcee of *Truth or Consequences* from the town of the same name. He was also center stage at the ongoing victory celebration. He had promised he would continue to showcase the town, and he would carry out that promise over the ensuing years. Indeed, for Edwards's next big stunt, all roads led back to Truth or Consequences, NM. On his April 15, 1950, broadcast, Edwards went out into the audience searching for a golfer and found Al Baker. Baker's assignment? He would play the longest golf course in

history, from outside the *Truth or Consequences* studio to Truth or Consequences in New Mexico. The course was 823 miles long and the feat tallied 11,469 strokes and 42 days to complete. Press reports and public sightings seemed to track Al Baker's every swing.

In March 1951, *Truth or Consequences* unveiled its newest charity quiz, Grandma Hush, on behalf of the National Arthritis and Rheumatism Foundation. It just so happened these ailments were afflictions the therapeutic hot springs in and around Truth or Consequences in New Mexico were reputed to alleviate. Grandma Hush was eventually revealed to be Mrs. George M. Cohan, widow of the famed writer and performer. The contest also underscored that *Truth or Consequences* now had a new mailing address: Truth or Consequences, New Mexico.

The town's annual Fiesta Celebration, a 3-day festival, now encompasses the anniversary of its re-christening. On that first anniversary, Ralph Edwards returned for another broadcast. In fact, it was recorded that Edwards returned faithfully every year for the next 50 years to enjoy the festivities and rekindle old memories. 🎙️





Spike Jones continued

and 1950s. On *Music America Loves Best*, he played his somewhat less than sentimental version of "I'm Getting Sentimental Over You" with Tommy Dorsey joining in on trombone. He reprised "Hawaiian War Chant" with Mickey Katz on vocal and backed Bing Crosby on "Love in Bloom" (with vocal effects by Red Ingle) on Crosby's *Philco Radio Time*. He turned up sans Slickers on *Ellery Queen*, *People Are Funny* and *Bill Stern's Sports Newsreel*, where he once enthused about his little-known "favorite sport," midget auto racing, which he indulged by sponsoring two of Gordon Schroeder's small cars at regional tracks.

The bandleader's most memorable guest shot arguably came on *Truth or Consequences* late in 1948. Midway through the program, host Ralph Edwards told a Mrs. Andrews of Los Angeles, "For your consequence tonight we want you to sing 'Glow-Worm.' Behind the curtain we have a full orchestra to accompany you." He then introduced her to the conductor, a

bearded gentleman by the name of Dr. Spikuro Jonesivini.

The contestant revealed a lush operatic voice as she began: "When the night falls si-lent-ly, the night falls si-lent-ly..."

Honk! Crash! Honkhonkhonk! Bang! Bang! Bang! Honkhonkhonk!

Mrs. Andrews continued gamely, in spite of the commotion. "Wait a minute!" screamed the host. "WAIT A MIIINUUUTE! WAAAIT A MIIINUUUTE! WHAT'S GOING ON? WHAT IS GOING ON?!"

Edwards interrupted the rendition to reveal the conductor's true identity. "You were expecting maybe Toscanini?" quipped Jones. Following an encore of "The Glow-Worm," he reminded the host that Ed-

wards was to guest on his show the following week. "I can't sing and I can't play an instrument," protested the host. "What can you do with me on your show?"

Jones chuckled. "Naïve, isn't he?"



1946 record shop advert



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SPERDVAC ELECTION RULES

The Election Chair will be appointed by the President. The Chair will see that a notice of election is in the November-December issue of the *SPERDVAC Radiogram*, sperdvac.com, and/or email notification. A copy of the election rules will also appear in the same issue.

Members wishing to run in the election for the Board of Directors must declare their candidacy and submit a candidate statement to the Election Chair by the second Saturday in January [January 11, 2025].

In order to be a candidate for election, a candidate must be a member in good standing and be able to meet the requirements and fiduciary duties of a SPERDVAC board member. Candidate statements shall be limited to 200 words and must be received by the election chair by 11:59pm on the second Saturday in January.

The current board will review the candidates and their statements, determine their suitability for election, and certify the nominees for the election ballot.

Ballots with the candidate statements will be mailed or electronically sent to each member who is in good standing and eligible to vote by the first weekend in February. The members must return their ballots or complete their electronic entry to the election chair by the second Friday in March [March 7, 2025].

Ballots must be created and handled, whether physical or electronic, in a fashion that insures one member, one vote.

The Election Chair is responsible for coordinating, conducting the election, counting the votes, and certifying the election.

The results, which include the exact count of the voters for each candidate, will be communicated prior to on the March Board meeting and will be published in the April newsletter or on the website. Candidates suitable for election must have received at least 10% of the votes counted.

For the election to be valid, the minimum number of members voting for a quorum must be at least 5% of the membership whose dues are current and are eligible to vote. If there is not the necessary number of ballots for a quorum, the Election Chair will conduct a second election by the second Saturday in April. They shall be counted at the May meeting.

Ballots shall be maintained by the Election Chair for a period of one year and the results should remain permanently with the corporate records.



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