

# The History of the Twentieth Century

## Episode 309

### “The Golden Age of Radio”

#### Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

In the 1930s, American radio programming was almost entirely under the control of a handful of advertising agencies. Ads became more frequent and more strident, but people kept listening.

A number of vaudeville comedians migrated to radio, as stand-up comedy evolved into situation comedy.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 309. The Golden Age of Radio.

Comedy came into its own on radio in the Thirties, and radio became full of comedians. To tell that story, I want to focus on one of the best-known, most successful, and most influential among them, and who also totally by coincidence happens to be my personal favorite. Allow me to introduce him to you:

Benjamin Kubelsky was born on February 14, 1894 in Chicago, Illinois and grew up in nearby Waukegan. His parents were—say it with me—Jewish immigrants from what was then the Russian Empire.

You know, two weeks ago, in episode 307, I spoke at some length about the talented people the Nazis ran out of Germany in the 1930s. Germany suffered from that loss for decades afterward. Do modern Russians ever consider how many talented people the Romanovs drove out of the old Empire, or ponder how the loss of all these people affected Russia and its neighboring countries? I wonder. But I digress.

Young Ben began playing the violin at the age of six and took to the instrument. His parents had dreams of him becoming a professional violinist, but he was an indifferent student, eventually getting expelled from high school.

But he loved the violin. He played in bands and orchestras, and by the age of 15, was playing violin on the vaudeville stage. There he met and became friendly with the Marx Brothers. They wanted him to go on tour with them, but Ben's parents wouldn't allow it. He also got complaints from classical violinist and composer Jan Kubelik, who objected that Ben Kubelsky's name was too similar to his own. So Kubelsky took the stage name Ben Benny. Over time, his act evolved from violin playing to a mixture of violin and standup comedy, because this is vaudeville and that's how you make it in vaudeville. But now this drew complaints from yet another performer, a fellow who also did a violin and comedy act and was named Ben Bernie, so our Ben changed his stage name once again, this time to Jack Benny.

In 1922, Zeppo Marx invited 28-year-old Jack Benny to a Passover Seder, where he met 17-year-old Sadie Marks. They got off on the wrong foot, but eventually married in 1927 and Sadie joined his vaudeville act, choosing as her stage name Mary Livingstone. They would work together for thirty years, until Mary retired from show business. MGM signed Jack Benny to a film contract in 1929, but his films did not do well and he left Hollywood to return to vaudeville, nightclubs and theatre. He appeared on radio for the first time in 1932, on a CBS variety show hosted by Ed Sullivan.

His show went by various names over the years, but Jack Benny was on radio, and later television, from 1932 to 1965 and was one of the biggest names in entertainment in mid-twentieth century America. The transition from vaudeville to radio was a natural one; just as in the case of talking pictures, a mix of spoken comedy and music was a great fit for the new medium. I want to focus for a few minutes on Jack Benny's 1930s radio shows, because they epitomize the evolution of the radio in this era.

His show was initially called *The Canada Dry Program*, after its sponsor. Later it was *The General Tire Revue*, *The Jell-O Program*, *The Lucky Strike Program*, and eventually, after putting the sponsor's name into the title of the show went out of fashion, simply *The Jack Benny Program*. In the early days, it was more of a variety show, like an on-air version of a vaudeville show. Benny would introduce various acts, most of them singers and musicians, and tell a few jokes in-between or banter with his wife, Mary Livingstone.

One of the things that made Jack Benny stand out from other comedians of his time was his willingness to make himself the butt of the joke, something most other comics of the time were loathe to do. He gradually developed a stage persona as vain, irritable, stingy, and lacking in talent. He would lie about his age, brag about his musicianship and then play the violin badly, and above all, play the cheapskate. A gag about his car ran as long as his show; supposedly he drove a 1923 Maxwell, a brand that had been off the market for decades.

He was also a master of comic timing, and some of his funniest moments involved him not saying anything, as in a famous radio bit in which a mugger confronts Jack with a pistol and

demands, “Your money or your life!” A pause. A longer pause. An even longer pause. The mugger says, “Well?” and Jack says, “I’m thinking!”

Jack Benny also claimed credit for inventing the humorous commercial. This began as soon as the show did, back when his sponsor was Canada Dry. On one occasion, he told the audience of a taste test, where they gave Canada Dry to a group of people dying of thirst in Death Valley, and not one of them said they didn’t like it. On another, he told a joke about his father-in-law drinking up everything in the United States, so he went up north and drank Canada Dry. This was no doubt a reflection of Benny’s training in vaudeville, but sponsors varied in how willing they were to put up with this treatment. Canada Dry wasn’t; they dropped his show in less than two years.

But by the mid-1930s, General Foods was sponsoring Jack Benny in the name of their sweetened and flavored gelatin dessert product, called Jell-O. It was Jack Benny’s bandleader who created the famous Jell-O jingle, by the way, and what was once a niche product sold so well after advertising on Jack Benny’s show that the manufacturer literally could not make the stuff fast enough to keep up with the demand. By this time, Benny had enough clout he could insist in his sponsorship contract that the sponsor could write the ads read by the announcer at the beginning and the end of the program, but in between, Benny and his writers would incorporate product ads into the show as part of the comedy and as they saw fit.

Speaking of announcers, in 1934, Jack Benny’s program took on former college football player and sports broadcaster Don Wilson as its announcer. Remember last week, when I talked about how advertising agencies would write the copy for a print ad, as well as choose the font and the layout? What’s the radio equivalent of choosing the font and layout? The answer, according to the agencies, was choice of announcer. Announcers with different voices and demeanors were chosen by different sponsors based on what the ad agency thought was a good fit between the sound of the voice and the product. These announcers would introduce and end the show, read the credits, and—crucially—the commercial copy.

Strangely enough, these announcers became celebrities in their own right. For example, the popular variety show *The Chase and Sanborn Hour* was hosted by a young vaudevillian named Don Ameche. An anonymous network announcer would introduce Ameche, who then in turn would introduce the program.

Don Wilson announced for Jack Benny, reading commercials and credits, and they incorporated him into the program as well. As the decade progressed, *The Jack Benny Program* would evolve from something that was mostly a variety show into a format where the first half of the show would be singing and kidding around, which then would segue into an extended skit that would take up the second half; something like, Jack takes Mary out to a restaurant, or Jack goes on a train trip, or Jack goes Christmas shopping. That last was a popular one. And after a couple of years of that, the variety show aspect would dwindle away, and the show evolved into an early

example of what we now call a situation comedy, in which Jack and Mary and the other performers would play versions of themselves.

In 1937, the writers created a bit in which Jack rides a train and gets sassed by the porter. To play the role of the porter, Benny hired an African-American vaudeville comedian named Eddie Anderson. The bit was so popular that they invited Anderson back a few weeks later, this time to play a waiter Benny encounters in a restaurant. After several successful one-off bits like these, Anderson was signed to the cast of the show. Benny created the character of Rochester van Jones for Anderson. Rochester became Benny's valet and, quite unusually for the time, often got the better of him. Soon Rochester was second only to Mary in the number of zingers he unloaded on his boss, and in later years, when Mary Livingstone began to suffer from stage fright and reduced her role in the show, Rochester became Benny's principal antagonist.

This made Eddie Anderson the first African-American performer to be hired for a regular role on an American radio program and it represents an important breakthrough. I said I admired Benny for his willingness to be the butt of the jokes on his own show, but consider that most of those jokes told at his expense came from either his wife or a Black man. That was unprecedented.

Jack Benny and his show became a pop culture phenomenon. Even people who didn't listen to the show knew all about his Maxwell and his lying about his age and his lousy violin playing. They joked about them on *Fibber McGee and Molly*. *Amos 'n' Andy* did a bit where Amos remarked that he had listened to Jack Benny and didn't find him very funny, to have Andy agree that, "He's nothing without Rochester."

And most famously, fellow vaudevillian and radio star Fred Allen, had on his show, *Town Hall Tonight*, a child violinist. After the boy performed, Allen quipped that his guest was only in the fifth grade, but already a better violinist than Jack Benny. This inaugurated a famous feud between the two comedians that went on for more than a decade. They would mock each other on their own shows and even visit each other's programs to deliver the put-downs face to face. It was all carefully scripted, of course; the writing staffs of the two shows collaborated and always made sure the visiting star got the better of the host on their cross-program performances. Allan and Benny were close friends in real life, but there were plenty of people in the radio audience who believed the feud was real.

The growing popularity of radio meant larger audiences for these programs which led to networks jacking up their advertising rates. Sponsors resented this, because these programs were produced by the sponsors themselves, through their advertising agencies, and not by the networks. If the programs were popular, it was because the sponsors had made them so, but instead of gratitude from the networks, they were getting penalized with higher rates.

Higher advertising rates meant higher costs for the sponsors, which meant their ads had to produce higher sales, so what radio listeners got was lots of commercials with emphasis on the hard sell. By the late Thirties, you began to hear complaints that the incessant, strident

advertising was ruining the radio experience. Networks tried to rein in advertisers by laying down guidelines. The ads had to be tasteful. They couldn't derogate their competitors, or even mention competing products by name, but as soon as the networks laid down their rules, the advertisers looked for loopholes. Or outright threatened to take their show and their advertising dollars to another network.

There were only four networks: NBC Red, NBC Blue, CBS, and Mutual. Ninety-seven percent of American radio stations of this era were affiliated with one of them, and the networks wanted to keep it that way. Remember that network programming was created in New York City, and piped to the affiliates through AT&T's long distance network. The technology existed to record programs by phonograph. In theory, you could record a program in advance and ship it to the stations on records, but the networks refused to distribute that way. They said it was because the recorded sound was inferior in quality, but it had at least as much to do with wanting to exert control over the affiliates, including over when and how they broadcast network programming.

This in turn was unpopular with the performers. The United States is divided into four time zones, so they had to perform every show twice—once for the Eastern and Central time zones, and again an hour later for the Mountain and Pacific time zones.

Radio stars had to please the network and the sponsor, and it could be frustrating. No one exhibited this frustration more than Fred Allen. Allen's comedy style was biting and satirical and he had a penchant for unscripted ad-libs. His show, *Town Hall Tonight*, pioneered parody and satire of the news and current events. Allen was forever squabbling with his sponsors and network and his acerbic criticisms of the industry are legendary. He later said, "An air comedian works under tremendous handicaps. He has a sponsor who pays the bills. The sponsor has an agency to represent it. The radio chains all have a flock of rules, all starting with 'You mustn't...' In the secret heart of all these people—sponsors, agency, and chain—is a belief that each of them is some sort of kilocycle Ziegfeld."

Allen would engage his producer, Pat Weaver, live on the program in exchanges meant to poke fun at the advertisers and the network. Allen liked to call advertising executives "molehill men," because, he said, their profession involved taking molehills and making them into mountains.

And what role did government play in all this? The ability of the Federal government to regulate radio was not clear cut. The Federal Communications Commission had the power to grant or deny licenses to local stations and the Federal Trade Commission had the power to act against unfair or deceptive advertising, but who regulated the networks? And if an ad was unfair or deceptive, was it the sponsor or the ad agency that was liable?

I mentioned earlier how over the course of the 1930s, Jack Benny's show evolved from something like an on-air vaudeville show to something more like a situation comedy. *Amos 'n' Andy* was the first situation comedy; by the late Thirties and early Forties, situation comedies replaced stand-up as the main vehicle for comedy on radio, notably shows like *Fibber McGee*

*and Molly* and *The Burns and Allen Show*. Both of these shows, like *The Jack Benny Program* featured comedy centered on a married couple and played by performers who were married in real life and had learned their trade in the vaudeville circuit. *Burns and Allen* featured Gracie Allen as an addled wife forever telling confusing stories with questionable logic as her befuddled husband, George Burns, tries, and usually fails, to keep up.

In *Fibber McGee and Molly*, the husband, the titular Fibber McGee, was a ne'er-do-well who told tall tales and more than a few little white lies to his long-suffering wife, Molly, who frequently responded to his attempts at humor with "'Tain't funny, McGee!" which became the show's catchphrase. *Fibber McGee and Molly* became the first radio show to produce a spinoff series when McGee's pompous next-door neighbor, Throckmorton P. Gildersleeve, got his own show, *The Great Gildersleeve*, in 1941. In 1945's the McGees' African-American maid, Beulah, got her own series, too, although, unlike Rochester van Jones, Beulah was played by a white performer. And a white male performer, at that.

I spoke earlier of drama, and how in the first days of radio, the medium was perceived as something like broadcast theatre. There were a number of drama shows on radio that did one-off performances of existing plays as well as new plays and adaptations written for radio.

Perhaps the most prominent, certainly the best remembered radio dramatist and thespian of the age was a brash young man named George Orson Welles, born on May 6, 1915 in Kenosha, Wisconsin. Welles' family was well off, but his childhood was not a happy one and he lost both his parents by the age of fifteen. A year later, he graduated from an expensive private school and was offered a scholarship to Harvard College, which he declined, choosing instead to study painting and spend some of his inheritance on an extended visit to Ireland. There he talked his way into performing at Dublin's Gate Theatre for a time.

He returned to the United States and in 1933, the 18-year-old Welles was introduced to theatre critic and Algonquin Roundtable regular Alexander Woolcott, who got him a place in a repertory theatre company. By 1935, when he was still just 19, Welles began getting parts in radio dramas.

Welles' acting ability and his resonant and versatile baritone voice got him invited to perform so many roles that by the age of 20, Orson Welles was working long hours, hopping from studio to studio, as one of the most in demand, not to mention highly paid, radio actors in the business. At \$1500 per week, he was making Hollywood film star money.

British-American actor and producer John Houseman invited Welles to work with him in the Federal Theatre Project, a WPA program, part of the New Deal, to fund live theatre in the United States. Welles produced and directed stage plays with Federal money, but also kicked in some of his own radio income. Welles later claimed that President Roosevelt told him he was the only person in history who ever secretly funneled money *into* a government program. His first show was an adaptation of *Macbeth* with an all-African-American cast, set in Haiti.

In 1937, when he was still just 22 years old, Welles left the Federal Theatre Project to found his own repertory company, the Mercury Theatre, along with Houseman, all the while still working in radio. Many of the actors performing in the Mercury Theatre would go on to become famous names on stage and screen. Later that year, the Mutual Broadcasting System contracted with Welles and his Mercury Theatre to produce an acclaimed seven-episode radio adaptation of *Les Misérables*. For a year he played Lamont Cranston, the title character in Mutual's radio series *The Shadow*, as in "Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men?"

The following year, 1938, Welles left *The Shadow* to take up an offer from CBS to produce a new one-hour drama series that would perform radio adaptations of literary classics, with Welles playing the lead role in every episode. The show began in July and Welles drew from the cast of the Mercury Theatre to fill the other roles. The show was initially called *First Person Singular*, and later *The Mercury Theatre on the Air*. It was broadcast at 8:00 PM on Sundays, Eastern time.

The show broadcast adaptations of such classics as *Dracula*, *Treasure Island*, *The Count of Monte Cristo* and *Oliver Twist*. Then came the October 30, 1938 episode of the program. As it was the evening before Halloween, Welles chose to put on a radio adaptation of H.G. Wells' 1898 proto-science-fiction novel, *The War of the Worlds*.

Welles was known for his visionary re-imaginings of the classics, as in that Haitian version of *Macbeth*. He'd also staged *Julius Caesar* in a contemporary fascist setting, as if the story were taking place in 1930s Rome or Berlin, and the critics said that Welles' *Julius Caesar* felt so fresh, you could have believed it happened yesterday.

So no surprise that Welles chose to update the 1898 story to 1938 and move the setting from the outskirts of London to the outskirts of New York City. The real-life town of Grover's Mill, New Jersey, to be specific. Nor is it surprising that Welles came up with an innovative and contemporary way to tell the story. Instead of relying on the usual narrative techniques of radio drama, Welles chose to tell the first part of the story as if it were unfolding in real time before our eyes...well, before our ears. Welles began with a brief introduction, similar to the one that opens the novel: "We now know that in the early years of the twentieth century, this world was being watched closely by intelligences greater than man's and yet as mortal as his own..."

After the introduction, the program offers what is purportedly a remote broadcast of music from a New York hotel ballroom. The music is interrupted by a news story about strange explosions detected on the surface of Mars. A radio reporter interviews a Princeton University astronomer, played by Orson Welles, who dismisses talk of intelligent life on Mars. Then back to the music for a bit, then an announcement that a meteorite has landed in Grover's Mill. The reporter and the astronomer visit the site and do a remote report describing a strange metal cylinder. It opens and the police and crowd that have gathered are incinerated by a heat ray. The reporter's account is cut off in mid-sentence, and a studio announcer explains that they've lost the remote feed.

The story unfolds in this vein as Martian tripod machines march on New York City, destroying soldiers and aircraft sent against them, leading up to a news reporter atop the CBS building in New York giving an account of the tripods reaching Manhattan and destroying the city. The radio goes silent, except for a ham radio operator calling out, asking if anyone is there. Then silence.

The final twenty minutes of the program revert to conventional radio drama, a first person account by Welles, as the Princeton astronomer, who survived the attack, making his way to New York City through the devastated landscape. In the city he learns, as was the case in the novel, that the Martians have succumbed to terrestrial microorganisms.

The show included announcements at the beginning and at each program break clarifying that this was a dramatization. Nevertheless, at 8:30 that Sunday evening, just halfway through the show, the phone calls began to pour into CBS. Apparently, a lot of people tuned in after the opening and believed what they were listening to was the real thing.

The most popular show in that time slot was NBC Red's *Chase and Sanborn Hour*, hosted by Don Ameche, with Dorothy Lamour, Nelson Eddy, and Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy, because one of the most popular radio stars of the time was a ventriloquist, and no, I am not making this up. Anyway, it seems that some people were listening to that show until the first commercial break, then they started twirling the dial to see what else was on and stumbled into Welles' fake news bulletins.

Also, *The Mercury Theatre on the Air* was a sustaining program, meaning that the network had created the show itself and it did not yet have a sponsor. Networks sometimes did this in time slots they couldn't sell. The hope was that the show would become popular enough to attract a sponsor, who would then take over the cost of producing it. In this instance, the fact that the show had no commercials probably contributed to a sense that it was real breaking news.

The network asked the program's engineers to put out an announcement that the show was fiction. But by then, they had come to a scheduled break, which already included such an announcement. At the end of the hour, Welles addressed the audience directly in a hastily scripted closing explaining this was the Mercury Theatre's Halloween offering, the radio equivalent of, as Welles put it, "dressing up in a sheet, jumping out of a bush, and saying, 'Boo!'"

As the show went off the air, the CBS headquarters was swarming with police and reporters. Welles slipped out the back because he was due at a late evening rehearsal at the Mercury Theatre. As he made his way across town, the electric news ticker at the *Times* building was displaying in huge incandescent letters ORSON WELLES CAUSES PANIC.

With the benefit of historical hindsight, we can see that this story was overplayed. It appears that perhaps as many as a million Americans, almost 1% of the population, believed for at least a few



minutes that the Martian invasion was real. Studies afterward showed that most of them didn't pick up on the alien invasion aspect of the show; they thought it was coverage of a natural disaster, or maybe a German invasion. Many of them picked up the telephone to call loved ones, or the police, or the newspapers, looking for confirmation of the story. Newspapers and police departments across the United States found themselves suddenly inundated with phone calls and assumed mass panic.

Rumors flew of suicides or people trampled to death, though these stories were greatly overblown. There is no known instance of even a single death that can be attributed to the program, or of anything that could be called mass panic, although you might call it a mass anxiety that afflicted a large number of Americans for at least a few minutes. But the story of Orson Welles and *War of the Worlds* was on the front pages of American newspapers for days afterward.

Welles and CBS were bombarded with hostile questions from reporters. Now, to understand this, you have to consider the rivalry between print news and radio, which I talked about last week. The *Hindenburg* disaster the previous year demonstrated how immediate and compelling radio journalism could be; *The War of the Worlds* demonstrated that even so, radio was primarily an entertainment medium, and print journalists eagerly pointed out that, unlike a newspaper, which only prints facts, what you hear on a radio broadcast might be real, or it might be some twenty-something creative prodigy's idea of innovative entertainment.

The *Toronto Star* published an editorial cartoon mocking an American couple who in one panel scoff at how Germans are duped by Nazi propaganda, while in the next panel they are fleeing in terror as the radio announces an invasion from Mars. Even Adolf Hitler got in on the act, declaring that the episode was evidence of the corrupt and decadent state of democratic countries.

If you wanted to denounce American society of the 1930s as corrupt and decadent, you might be better advised to point not to Orson Welles' radio drama but to the sponsor-driven programming and the endless hard-sell commercials. In 1932, only advertising industry lobbying defeated a US Senate resolution calling for a return to the days when radio sponsorships were limited to attaching the sponsor's name to the program. Not that a Senate resolution would have changed anything.

Inventor Lee DeForest, whose vacuum tubes made radio possible, grumbled publicly that his invention had been debased by crass commercialism. One essayist in *Fortune* magazine complained that advertiser-driven radio had become "corny, strident, boresome, florid, inane, repetitive, irritating, offensive, moronic, adolescent, or nauseating."

But people kept listening. The late Thirties saw the development of the advertising jingle, which critics denounced as a new low. These jingles were catchy earworms, designed to get radio listeners to continue humming the advertising pitch to themselves even when the radio was

turned off. One of the earliest and most notorious of these jingles was the little Pepsi song I played for you earlier. The message of the ad is a simple example of reason-why advertising: Pepsi-Cola is twelve ounces for a nickel, which is twice as much as you get from Coca-Cola, which sold six-ounce bottles for the same price. During the Great Depression, that's a potent sales pitch. But Pepsi dressed it up in a catchy jingle that went viral, as we would say today. The song became so popular that Pepsi released it as a phonograph record, and people actually spent their nickels, not to drink twelve full ounces of Pepsi, but to put in a jukebox so they could listen to...a commercial? Seriously, that's harder to believe than the Martian invasion.

Concerns about deceptive advertising and the failure to protect consumers led to the creation in 1929 of a nonprofit group called Consumers' Research that published a monthly magazine called *Consumers' Research Bulletin* which called attention to false advertising claims and published results of independent tests on the quality of consumer products. In 1936, the staff of Consumers' Research, frustrated at the organization's resistance to their forming a union quit *en masse* to form the competing group Consumers Union, and published their own magazine, *Consumer Reports*. The upstart group supplanted the earlier organization and Consumers Union and *Consumer Reports* will be operating for the rest of the century and still operate in our time.

Unionization was very much on the minds of people in the 1930s, given the Great Depression and new laws to protect labor rights. Radio performers formed their own union in 1937, the American Federation of Radio Artists, which soon signed up big-name radio stars like Jack Benny, Edgar Bergen, Eddie Cantor, and Bing Crosby and in 1938 negotiated a contract with the radio networks.

In 1939, the Federal Communications Commission ruled that NBC was monopolizing network radio by operating two networks, NBC Red and NBC Blue. After years of litigation, a 1943 Supreme Court decision upheld the ruling and NBC was forced to sell off the less popular and less profitable NBC Blue Network. NBC Red became simply NBC, while NBC Blue would come to be known as the American Broadcasting Company, or ABC.

And the days of New York City holding a monopoly on radio program production were numbered. Many of the most popular and highly-paid actors, singers, and musicians in America were working for the film industry in Hollywood and it wasn't practical for them to take a five-day train trip across the country to appear on a radio show. By the late 1930s, radio networks were increasingly originating programs in California rather than New York. AT&T, the company that provided the long-distance lines that made radio networks possible, initially insisted on treating a program originating in California as a remote broadcast; that is, the program would first have to be piped to New York and then distributed from there. But within a few years, programs originating in California would be distributed directly to affiliates around the country, and that would presage an entertainment revolution.

But that is a story for another episode. We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank Clinton for his kind donation, and thank you to Joseph for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Clinton and Joseph help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone, so my thanks to them and to all of you who have pitched in and helped out. If you'd like to become a patron or make a donation, just visit the website, [historyofthetwentiethcentury.com](http://historyofthetwentiethcentury.com) and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

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And I hope you'll join me next week, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we turn away from radio but remain in the United States to consider President Roosevelt's second term. A Switch in Time, next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. Later that night, after the *War of the Worlds* broadcast, a witness describes a distraught Orson Welles saying "I'm washed up. I'm through." This was hardly the case. Welles would apologize for the broadcast and feel sheepish about it at first. Later, when it became clear he would always be remembered as the fellow behind that program, he embraced his identity as the performer who panicked a nation. In October 1940, the 25-year-old Orson Welles and the 74-year-old H.G. Wells both happened to be appearing in San Antonio, Texas. They were interviewed together about the famous broadcast on a local radio station, the one and only time these two men would meet.

A year earlier, in 1939, RKO Radio Pictures signed Welles to an amazingly generous contract to produce two films, giving him full creative control, especially remarkable when you consider he was only 24 and had never made a feature film before. RKO didn't like his first couple of ideas, including a film adaptation of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, but they greenlit his third idea, *Citizen Kane*, a fictionalized version of the life of William Randolph Hearst. Welles produced, directed, and co-wrote the film, as well as playing the title role.

Hearst himself was infuriated by the project. Hearst newspapers refused to acknowledge its existence and Hearst orchestrated a pressure campaign within the film industry to prevent it being released. *Citizen Kane* got a limited release in 1941, to rave reviews and nine Academy Award nominations including Best Picture and Best Actor for Welles, but it only won one, for best original screenplay, possibly a result of Hearst's pressure campaign.

The film did not do well at the box office, although after the Second World War it began to be shown on television, which led to a reappraisal of the film, and nowadays it is generally

considered a masterpiece and one of the greatest American films, possibly the greatest. Welles' cinematic innovations greatly influenced future filmmakers, putting *Citizen Kane* in the same category as *Birth of a Nation* or *Battleship Potemkin* in breaking new ground in cinematic technique.

Things went downhill from there. RKO renegotiated his contract, taking away much of his creative freedom. During the war, he was found unfit for military service for health reasons, and always felt guilty about that, although he did serve as an American goodwill ambassador to Latin America.

Welles continued to work in film, radio, and theatre, though his work was often compromised by creative conflicts. He stepped on many toes, and angered many people, including his friends and supporters. He abandoned Hollywood altogether and spent ten years making films in Europe. Much of this work went unfinished, including a mammoth attempt to film *Don Quixote*.

He returned to the US in 1970 and discovered he was still in demand as an actor, and his singular voice was still prized for voiceovers, documentaries, animation, and commercials. He became a regular on TV talk shows.

On October 9, 1985, Orson Welles recorded a talk-show appearance on *The Merv Griffin Show*, then went home and worked late into the night on one of his projects. He died early in the morning of October 10, of a heart attack. He was 70 years old.

[music: Closing Theme]