



## "Those Eddie Cantor Eyes..." The Enigma of The Most Popular Weekly Show Ever Heard.

by Elizabeth McLeod

There are stars, and then there are STARS.

Some radio performers seem to fit right into your living room... small-scale, intimate, just like a member of the family. And, not coincidentally, it's these performers who seem to command the greatest following among Old Time Radio enthusiasts.

But other performers were, and remain, Larger than Life. Filled with boisterous energy, these performers charge out of the loudspeaker, threatening to overwhelm you with the sheer force of personality. It's a performing style that has less to do with the microphone than with the traditions of the Broadway musical comedy stage, and it's a style that seems entirely foreign to most modern OTR listeners. For that matter, it's a style that with a few exceptions had vanished from the airwaves long before the end of the OTR era itself.

And so it is that when confronted by these stage-oriented performers, modern listeners often find themselves in a quandary. What are these people trying to do? Are they playing a

character? Are they acting? What's with all the singing and dancing and antics that we can't even see?

And no performer seems to inspire these questions more than Eddie Cantor. As a result, Cantor's following among OTR buffs is rather mild compared to that inspired by the more radio-friendly performers like Jack Benny or Fibber and Molly -- even though at his peak, Cantor was far more popular than any of his rivals. At its peak, in 1932, Cantor's was the most popular weekly radio program on the air -- achieving the highest weekly rating of the \*entire OTR period.\*

Why?

For many years, OTR historians have had to guess at the answer to that question. Cantor's reputation among the Old Time Radio community has largely rested on his 1940s work, and while these shows are pleasant listening there's nothing to explain precisely why this odd little man with the bulging eyes had so captured the imagination of listeners a decade earlier. The really important Cantor material, the "Chase and Sanborn Hour" programs of 1931-34, had long been thought lost, and with them had been lost any chance for modern audiences to understand exactly what all the excitement was about.

The shows had been recorded. Beginning in 1931, Cantor contracted with Speak-O-Phone



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Incorporated of New York to have airchecks made on uncoated aluminum discs, so that he might evaluate each week's broadcast. Over the years, however, many of these programs were lost or damaged, and late in life Cantor ended up giving his entire audio archive to a rising young comedian named Jerry Lewis.



Eddie Cantor with popular guests stars, Olivia Major (left) and Dinah Shore

Decades passed -- and in the 1990s, the Cantor discs found their way back to the performer's family. Cantor's grandson, Brian Gari, has for several years been working his way thru the vast collection of radio recordings, reissuing several CD packages of 1940s-vintage Cantor material in pristine audio condition. These sets are a loving tribute to a legendary performer -- but until recently, the vitally important early years had been overlooked.

Now, however, modern listeners can finally tune back to the early 1930s and get a taste of the Cantor who gripped the attention of Depression-era audiences like no other solo star. "*The Eddie Cantor Chase & Sanborn Radio Show 1931-33*" (Original Cast Records OC-8715) is a four-CD set collecting some of the most historically-valuable OTR material ever reissued.

The set consists of one essentially-complete program, from December 1931, and the comedy segments of six other shows, from November and December 1933. *The Chase and Sanborn Hour* during this period was an unusual split format -- approximately half the show devoted to Cantor's comedy, and the other half to the music of David Rubinoff and his Orchestra. By 1933, Cantor was

only paying to have the comedy segments recorded, so these shows only survive in truncated form.

Full-length or condensed, however, these programs are a revelation. Here is the full-strength, non-decaffeinated Eddie Cantor: a performer of boundless energy who literally can't stand still. In the 1933 recordings, Cantor is all over the stage -- jumping, bouncing, singing, dancing, often overwhelming the live audience with the sheer force of his personality, just as he did in his legendary string of Broadway successes during the 1920s.

That live audience is a critical component in the success of the show. Cantor's first several *Chase and Sanborn* shows were broadcast with the audience isolated behind a huge glass curtain, and the lack of audible audience response in the December 1931 broadcast included in this set gives the show an odd, boxed-in sort of sound. Cantor's material in this early broadcast is surprisingly caustic, it's one of the earliest segments of his famous "Cantor for President" campaign, and his political jabs cut deep. Cantor had lost a fortune in the stock market crash, and was openly contemptuous of the Hoover administration -- and one gets a real sense that his jibes are coming straight from the heart. But as substantial as this material is, Cantor's timing seems off. His delivery depended on audience response for best effect - and without those laughs, he seems to be talking to himself.

Cantor himself understood this problem, and finally convinced NBC to allow the glass curtain to be raised. The 1933 recordings show the result -- revealing Cantor as a performer who fully involved his audience in his performances. He usually appears at the microphone in an outlandish costume -- in one broadcast, announcer Jimmy Wallington describes the comedian as being garbed in a full-length fur coat, a bra and girdle, silk stockings, and high heels, and the hysterical reaction of the studio audience makes it clear that Cantor is sashaying about the stage in precisely that outfit. Cantor frequently appeared in women's' clothing during these broadcasts, and his sketches with Wallington often verged into what was then known as "pansy" or "nance" comedy, giving the show a well-earned reputation for outrageous innuendoes. To the modern-day OTR fan who thinks blue humor is a modern innovation, these Cantor broadcasts will prove a revelation.

But it's not all nudge-nudge. Cantor uses every trick in the comedy textbook to keep his audience laughing -- broad slapstick, heavy insult comedy

## Reader's Digest Quiz

directed at orchestra leader Rubinfeld, and, most interestingly, frequent acknowledgment of his Jewish heritage. Cantor's references to matzoh balls and potato pancakes and even occasional Yiddishisms are a refreshing break from the completely de-ethnicized personae favored by most radio comics, and give Cantor's show a Lower East Side flavor absent from most other programs of the day. Conventional industry wisdom would have suggested that such an approach would have alienated rural audiences -- especially in an era in which heartland anti-Semitism was on the rise -- but Cantor's ratings told a different story. Eventually, Conventional Wisdom did win out -- and the Cantor of the later 1930s and 1940s is a distinctly less ethnic personality.

Cantor was obviously out to entertain the studio audience. After a lifetime on the stage, he could hardly avoid it. But did listeners at home get the full effect of his broadcasts? This is a point which was debated quite vigorously during the era of these programs -- several critics took Cantor to task for his stacy antics, and comedian Fred Allen, for one, wrote quite disparagingly about the Cantor style from the perspective of twenty years later. The actual ratings of the program, however, seem to emphasize that listeners didn't much care what the critics thought -- no other program in the history of radio ever exceeded the 58.6 Crosley rating logged by Cantor in early 1933. Clearly, Cantor was speaking to Depression America in language it could understand -- falling right in line with the manic style then popular in movies. The times were desperate; and so also was the comedy. That in a sentence is the best way to explain the extraordinary popularity such performers enjoyed.

Outrageous or not, Eddie Cantor was doing something right. And if you only know the "domesticated" Cantor of the 1940s, the Cantor of the early 1930s will be a real eye-opener.

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*"Radio Quiz of the Month" was the title of a wartime feature that appeared in the Reader's Digest. It consisted of a series of questions selected from the numerous radio quiz programs of the time, such as Dr. I.Q. on the NBC network and Are You a Genius? on CBS. Here is a selection from the thousands of questions that were asked and answered over the air.*

- 1) Is the toe of Italy's boot on the west or east side of the peninsula? (Dr. I.Q., NBC)
- 2) Why is butter churned in the summer a darker yellow than that churned in winter? (Are You a Genius?, CBS)
- 3) Experts tell us that when you are cutting roses to place them in water, you should always cut the stems slantwise. Why? (Dr. I.Q., NBC)
- 4) You've heard the threat "I'll break every bone in your body." In order to do this, how many bones would you have to break: approximately 200, 2000 or 20,000? (Dr. I.Q., NBC)
- 5) Would it be cheaper for you to take one friend to the movies twice -- or two friends at the same time? (Are You a Genius?, CBS)
- 6) There are 14 punctuation marks. Can you name eight? (Dr. I.Q., NBC)
- 7) Is the tip of the finger, the end of tongue or the bottom of the feet the most delicate organ of touch? (Thanks to the Yanks, CBS)
- 8) If your doctor gave you three pills and told you to take one every half hour, how long would they last? (Quiz of Two Cities, WOR)
- 9) Name seven articles, each starting with the letter "S", worn on the feet. (Truth or Consequences, NBC)
- 10) What fruit has its seeds on the outside? (Battles of the Sexes, NBC)
- 11) In Baseball, the batter hits a grounder and runs to first base. The shortstop fields the grounder and throws to first, the ball arriving at the same instant as the runner. Is the runner out or safe? (The Answer Man, WOR)
- 12) Zinc, copper, pewter, bronze, brass -- which of these are not alloys? (Battle of the Sexes, NBC)
- 13) Is a pundit a short pun, a learned man or one who habitually makes puns? (Dr. I.Q., NBC)
- 14) I bought a cow and a calf for \$85. The cow cost \$55 more than the calf. How much did I pay for the calf? (Dr. I.Q., NBC)
- 15) Is a zebra black with white stripes or white with black stripes? (Battle of the Sexes, NBC)
- 16) If you entered a dark room and had only one match and there was a kerosene lamp, an oil stove and a cigarette which would you light first? (Truth or Consequences, NBC) - **Ans. on page 6**