



# The Old Radio Times

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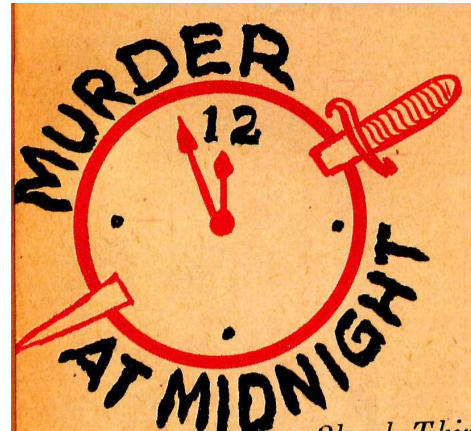
Send submissions, inquiries, and comments to OldRadioTimes@yahoo.com

## *Murder at Midnight: Killing the Competition Pt. 1*

By Karl Schadow©2019

A front page headliner in the May 3, 1946 issue of *Radio Daily* heralded the announcement that Alfred J. Hollender and Joseph W. Bailey of Louis G. Cowan, Inc. had successfully negotiated with World Broadcasting System (WBS) president Percy L. Deutsch and the firm's sales manager Herbert Gordon to produce and distribute a new transcribed thriller series. Ensuing publicity had the program billed as: "more than just a collection of the best mystery dramas ever produced - either live or recorded." This new venture, *Murder at Midnight* was the inaugural enterprise by the firm recently founded by the radio producer who had major accomplishments with previous programs.

A native of Chicago, Louis G. Cowan had been involved in the entertainment business for fifteen years as a ballroom promoter and later as a radio producer. In 1940, he conceived one of the medium's most iconic query programs which evolved into a major success, *Quiz Kids*. During World War II, he was



chief of the New York Office of the Overseas Branch of the Office of War Information and opted to pursue radio interests in Manhattan following the end of the war. Along with the two executives cited above who resided at the New York office, Cowan named long-time associate John Lewellen, vice-president and manager of the Chicago office to form Louis G. Cowan, Inc. (*Radio Daily*, February 13, 1946). Other members of Cowan's New York headquarters included Daniel Saidenberg, Music Director; Eliza Merrill Hickok, Publicity Director; Rachael Stevenson, Research Director and Program Coordinator Mary Watt. Though it does not cover *Murder at Midnight*, Martin A. Gardner's book on the *Quiz Kids* (McFarland, 2013) provides a comprehensive

history of Cowan's career through the mid-1950s. With current offices in all major media centers, WBS had been a leading participant in the production and distribution of transcribed programs since the early 1930s for both dramatic and musical series. A history of WBS and other related firms may be found in Alex Russo's *Points on the Dial* (Duke University Press, 2010).

This article, the first of two parts documenting the history of *Murder at Midnight* was inspired by an announcement in the Fall 2018 issue of this publication which dealt with the reassessment of the status of the series' extant audio. The current discourse will endeavor to present an overview of the chronology of the program including a sample of the vast array of sponsors and comments from the critics.

Recording of *Murder at Midnight* had commenced in mid-April of 1946. During the next nine months a total of fifty-two, 30-minute dramas would be waxed. The program was promoted via full page ads in major trade publications citing many of the key players. Included in this campaign was Robert Newman who was contracted as the chief scripter. Ultimately, a dozen other writers would also contribute their works. (A detailed study of the respective authors and their crafts will be presented in Part 2 of this treatise.)

Noteworthy is that Robert Newman and his fellow scribes were included in a *Radio Life* (October 27, 1946) profile of the series. This was indeed a rare occasion for the Hollywood-based magazine to provide such analysis of a transcribed, syndicated program that was produced outside of Southern California. For *Murder at Midnight*, the anonymously written portrait focused on the "Blood-Thirsty Triumvirate." The first of these individuals was director Anton M.



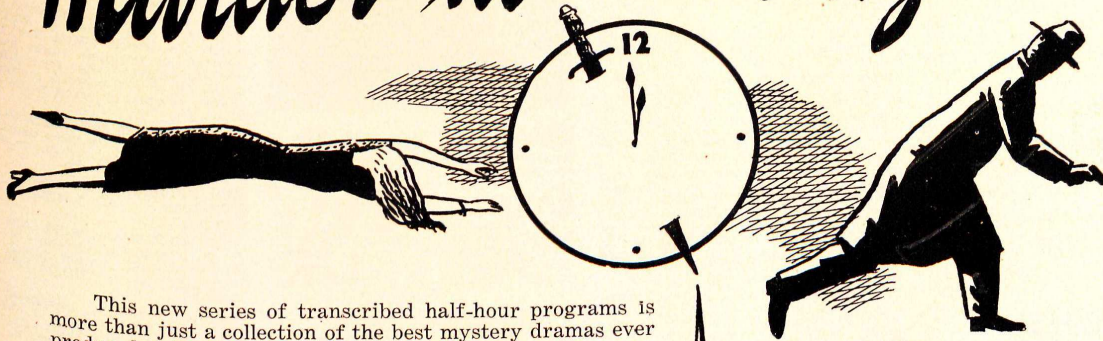
Anton Leader and WBS control booth engineer Alvin Butow

Leader. At the time he was selected for this post, Leader had built an impressive radio resume as a production director initially at WMCA in New York and then for Roger White Productions. In 1941, he joined the NBC production staff where he was instrumental in the success of both *Words at War* and *Home Is What You Make it*, among many others. In 1945, he resigned from network duties to engage freelance opportunities which included *You Make The News* and *Radio Reader's Digest*. The second of the *Radio Life* trio was musical director Charles Paul purported by *Variety* (July 17, 1946) to be earning \$75,000 per year (nearly \$1.5 million in 2019), as one of the highest paid musicians in the country. Among his numerous radio credits encompassing the mystery genre were *Inner Sanctum, Mr. & Mrs. North* and *House of Mystery* while those of daytime serials included *As The Twig Is Bent* and *Road of Life*. The third link in the triangle was announcer Raymond Morgan, a former Long Island minister



**For Sale! At a price any client can afford!  
A NEW KIND OF TRANSCRIPTION SHOW!**

# Murder at Midnight



This new series of transcribed half-hour programs is more than just a collection of the best mystery dramas ever produced—either live or recorded. For it represents a new idea in electrical transcriptions—the idea that a transcribed show's budget should match "live" show budgets. As a result, "Murder At Midnight" bows to no other program on the air.

Top-notch writers, actors, directors and producers have collaborated on this new recorded show. Top-notch engineering skill has recorded it. No expense has been spared to make it—yet it's offered at a price 1/2 to 1/3 lower than you'd expect. And the result is a witch's broth of shivers and suspense that will knock your audience for a ghoul!

**TOP-NOTCH WRITERS:** ROBERT NEWMAN (*Inner Sanctum, Mystery in the Air, The Man from G-2*) BILL MORWOOD (*Bulldog Drummond*) SIGMUND MILLER (*Inner Sanctum, Suspense*) PETER MARTIN (*Celebrity Club, An American Portrait*) MAX EHRlich (*Suspense, House of Mystery, Counterspy*).



**TOP-NOTCH CAST:** Narration: RAYMOND MORGAN (*This is Your FBI, Famous Jury Trials, Gangbusters, Counterspy*) Talent includes: BARRY HOPKINS, BETTY CAINE, BERRY KROEGER, AGNES YOUNG, AMZIE STRICKLAND, FRANK BEHRENS, LAWSON ZERBE, ROBERT LYNN, and other well-known network stars.



**TOP-NOTCH DIRECTION AND PRODUCTION:** Director: ANTON M. LEADER (*Radio Reader's Digest, You Make the News*). Music Director: CHARLES PAUL (*Mr. and Mrs. North, Ellery Queen*). Producer: LOUIS G. COWAN, INC. Sales, Recording and Processing: WORLD BROADCASTING SYSTEM.



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**LOUIS G. COWAN, Inc.**

250 W. 57th ST.

NEW YORK 19, N. Y.

Circle 6-4864

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**First Sponsor Signed in  
10 Minutes!**

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DISTRIBUTED THROUGH: **WORLD BROADCASTING SYSTEM, INC.**

A Subsidiary of DECCA RECORDS, INC., 711 FIFTH AVENUE, NEW YORK 22, N. Y.

WI 2-2100

May 1946 print ad





Charles Paul

who changed careers to become a radio actor and was heard in various 'heavy' roles on a plethora of shows from the washboard weepers including *Right to Happiness* to night time dramas such as *Gang Busters*. Of note are the omissions in the *Radio Life* biography, which lacked any mention of both Louis Cowan and WBS. Moreover, the program's originating center and transcribed nature were also absent. It did state however, that the series was being broadcast by the local KFI at 9:30, Friday evenings.

This NBC outlet was the first in the nation to air *Murder at Midnight* with broadcasts that commenced in mid-May. Though the firm bankrolling the series on KFI is still to be determined, the list of sponsors compiled for the program during the late 1940s is quite diverse. In addition to major network affiliates (such as KFI) the series was heard in numerous smaller markets including WFPG (Altoona, Pennsylvania) and KLXF (Butte, Montana) sponsored by the William F. Gable and Hennesy's department stores, respectively. Zale's Jewelers advertised over KROD (El Paso, Texas) as did Brundage Pharmacy via KERO in Bakersfield, California. On

KMBG (Honolulu, Hawaii) there were murders not only during the play itself but also during the commercial copy as furnished by the local office of The Terminix Company. *Murder at Midnight* was also presented to an audience outside of the continental U.S. by station KIFW in Sitka, Alaska.

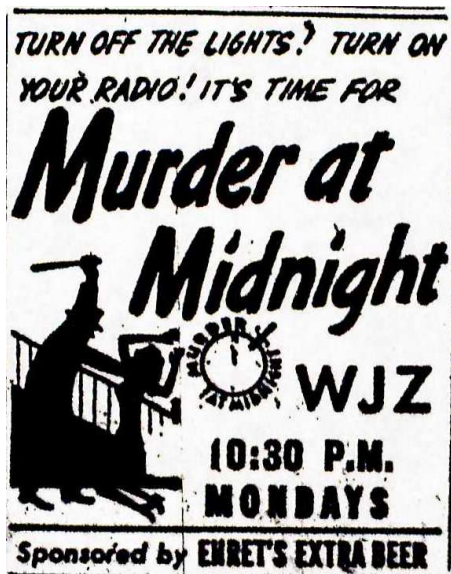


Raymond Morgan

As business continued to boom, Robert S. Michels announced (*Broadcasting Telecasting*, May 5, 1947) that he had increased the sales division staff of the Cowan firm and also consummated negotiations for the sales rights of *Murder at Midnight* to All-Canada Radio Facilities Ltd. One of the initial sponsors of the series in Canada was Garbert's (furriers) which slated the program on CFAC in Calgary, Alberta.

The commodity which had the greatest number of individual sponsors was that of the brewing industry. Considering the major markets, Birk Bros. was the advertiser on WGN (Chicago) while Acme Breweries paid the bills on San Francisco's KFRC. On a regional basis brands of Cold Spring Brewing were promoted in New England via WHDH (Boston), WLLH (Lowell) and WCSH (Portland). The firm that garnered

the most press in the trade was the George Ehret Brewing Company which sponsored the program on WJZ in New York.



Print ad promoting Ehret's sponsorship on WJZ

Though many print and online references state this was a network program for ABC, it was strictly a local WJZ venture. The misconception regarding the network status may have been derived from the many newspapers which utilized New York City station listings in their respective radio logs arbitrarily assigning network status to virtually all New York programs.

Moreover, *Murder at Midnight* is not listed in any of the ABC advertising portfolios during the 1940s. The Ehret business profited greatly through its advertising campaign with *Murder at Midnight*. This was trumpeted by Fred J. Hamm of ad agency Moore & Hamm, Inc. who correlated ratings to sales in the March 1947 issue of *Radio Showmanship*. Ehret's position in terms of sales for all brewers in the New York area jumped from twenty-second place to twelfth.

Additionally, *Murder at Midnight* became the top program in the Monday, 10:30 pm slot despite network competition from *Dr.*

*IQ* (NBC) and *Sweeney & March* (CBS).

However, the picture of the Ehret sponsorship was not all rosy as the advertisements were taken to task in a non-bylined *Variety* (August 6, 1947) exposé which proclaimed them as: "One of the worst cases of the failure of the agency and sponsor to trim their commercials to fit the show. This is a blood-bath program and the plugs - particularly the jingle sung by four girls - sound silly." The critique also faulted the middle commercial for breaking the show's suspense. This was a common complaint throughout radio's history for commercial programs of this genre.

As a transcribed, syndicated enterprise, *Murder at Midnight* was the recipient of a fair amount of criticism. Following the program's initial audition for the New York press, Saul Carson (writing as *Cars.* in *Variety*, May 29, 1946) offered this opinion for potential buyers: "For anyone interested in slotting a half-hour of cold chills and creeps, this series is it . . . you've got a show of network quality." Carson's concluding remarks stated: "There's other good creeper stuff on the air but little that beats this wax series." In his "Main Street" column (*Radio Daily*, May 24, 1946), Sid Weiss was most optimistic regarding the program's potential: "...for sheer psychological suspense we'll match it with anything now on the air. It's powerful stuff aimed for the late trade, and if you liked Arch Oboler's "Lights Out" series, wait'll you get an earful of this." Following several months of broadcasts on WJZ, radio's most esteemed pundit John Crosby (*New York Herald Tribune*, June 16, 1947) noted that the Cowan firm: "...is peddling two highly successful shows." Accompanying *Murder at Midnight* was a comedy, *The Smiths from Hollywood*. Crosby also mentioned the top ratings status of the mystery thriller. It is ironic that upon his initial mention of the series (*New York Herald Tribune*, January

17, 1947), Crosby facetiously posted that the program was not on at midnight and that there were no murders in a particular episode. However, he did note that it was: "...a very nice little horror story."

Conflicting viewpoints from listeners concerning the merits of the series were published by *New York Post* Radio Editor Paul Denis. In his March 1, 1947 column an ardent fan opined: "...holds me spellbound - the finest mystery program in acting, directing, plot." This was followed two weeks later (March 15, 1947) with: "Murder at Midnight features old stories and should change format." Evidently, this particular member of the WJZ audience was not in favor of script rekindling. This initial cycle of reviews was climaxed by Albert Williams who in a 1947 piece in the prestigious *The Saturday Review of Literature*, aptly summarized the program as: "... a quite high-class, adult mystery thriller, capably written, expertly produced, and in every way as good as the chillers that wealthy national advertisers shoot down the networks to you."

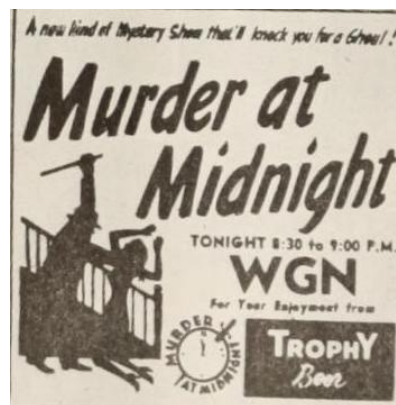
*Murder at Midnight* also garnered interest in a 1948 *Advertising & Selling* report by Ernest Whitney of the St. Louis-based Gardner Advertising Agency. In his assessment of the plattered mystery field, he recommended eight programs for consideration by potential sponsors. Six of these featured exploits of a single character (e.g. Eddie Ace, Boston Blackie) while the remaining two were anthologies. The first, which was released in 1945 was *The Haunting Hour* produced by the NBC Radio-Recording Division; the other was of course . . . *Murder at Midnight*. Noteworthy is that the former was promoted as "Mystery at its best." Though episodes of both series commenced with the sound of distant tolling bells, *The Haunting Hour* was much more subtle in nature with its narration and music than the hard-hitting Cowan enterprise.

In May of 1950, *Murder at Midnight*

became a sustaining venture on the Mutual network broadcast Monday's at 9:30 pm (Eastern). This undertaking prompted additional critique. Writing as *Gilb.*, George Gilbert (*Variety*, May 3, 1950) was not overly impressed with the program: "... is just another routine chiller series . . . was marked by standard writing devices used in horror pix a decade ago." June Bundy (*The Billboard*, June 3, 1950) had the opposite opinion of the series: "... an effectively scary airer, conveys much of the genuine eeriness of the old *Witch's Tales*." She struck a comparison between *Murder at Midnight* and contemporary thrillers: "... less tongue-in-cheek than the current run of punfull spook shows, this series is dead serious about its ghost stories, which should appeal to dialers who like their horror stuff straight."

The Cowan firm continued to oversee their prize mystery package until Harry S. Goodman Productions negotiated to obtain the distribution rights in the mid-1950s (*Broadcasting*, April 12, 1954). The Goodman firm continued to offer *Murder at Midnight* into the early 1960s.

Part II of this series will explore the scripts writers and each of their respective episodes along with providing identification of cast members.



Print ad for Risk Bros./Trophy Beer. Note differences in text versus Ehert's Beer copy from previous page.



## Kenny Baker: Interlude Singer for Great Comedians

Trav S.D.

(Originally Published September 30, 2018, and is reprinted with permission)

Today we pay tribute to Kenny Baker (1912-1985) and by that we mean neither the little person who played R2D2 in *Star Wars* (as most of our friends probably would) nor the fiddler who played with Bill Monroe.

No, ours is naturally the Irish tenor from radio and films in the '30s and '40s. Baker was from Monrovia, California and studied music at Long Beach City College. While there, he won a singing contest on a local radio station, which led to an engagement at the Cocoanut Grove night club. Early work in film included a part as a "singing narrator" in the shorts *The Night Before Christmas* (1933) and *The Goddess of Spring* (1934), a bit part as a cheerleader in *College Rhythm* (1934), and a solo singing spot in *George White's Scandals* (1935).

In 1935, Baker was hired to replace Frank Parker as the singer on Jack Benny's radio program, a slot he held on to for four years. At the same time, he was getting better parts in movies, like *King of Burlesque* (1936), *Mr. Dodd Takes the Air* (1937), *Turn Off the Moon* (1937), and *The Goldwyn Follies* (1938).

In 1939, he left the Benny show, only to be replaced by Dennis Day, who played an almost identical part through the show's most successful years and became better known at it. Baker presumably thought he was about to become a proper movie star at this juncture, for he got two plum gigs that year. First, he took over the **Allan Jones** spot as singing male ingenue for the Marx Brothers in *At the Circus* (a thankless task which he only did once). And he played Nanki-Poo in a movie version of *The Mikado*. "A Wandering Minstrel, I" would ever after be his theme song.

But Baker was not to achieve movie star level success. In 1940, he went back to radio, joining



Benny's competition by being the singer on Fred Allen's Texaco Star Theater, a post he held for two years. Other radio shows followed. He also appeared in the wartime musicals *Hit Parade of 1941*, *Stage Door Canteen* (1943) and *Doughboys in Ireland* (1943).

In 1943, yet a new phase in his career. He co-starred in the original Broadway production of *One Touch of Venus* (S.J. Perelman/ Kurt Weill/ Ogden Nash). It ran for two years. This led to his roles in the Hollywood musicals *The Harvey Girls* (1946) and *Calendar Girl* (1947).

In the early 1950s, Baker converted to Christian Science; the balance of his life's work was channeled into that faith, as a hymn singer and a motivational speaker.

*To find out more about the history of show business, please see my book No Applause, Just Throw Money: The Book That Made Vaudeville Famous.*

## *A Christmas Sing with Bing*

While I will be the first to admit that moving much of the group's regular communication and activity to Facebook

(<https://www.facebook.com/groups/1677714482510214/>) a couple years ago hastened the de facto extinction of the OTRR Yahoo Group page, there are times when the Facebook platform shows its chops.

One of those instances occurred over this most recent Christmas holiday. There aren't many places anymore where anything Bing Crosby-related can be said to "go viral." But we saw a bit of that on our page when one member posted a single Christmas Sing with Bing recording. Soon after another posted a separate year's recording, and within a few days all six of the known existing recordings (of eight, total) had been posted to the page.

It was a spontaneous group effort that I know was appreciated by probably hundreds of members because few evoke the spirit of Christmas to old-time radio fans so much as Bing!

Not wanting this effort to essentially disappear a couple weeks later (one of the downsides of using the Facebook platform), OTRR went ahead and collected those six recordings and collated them into a small Maintained (we're phasing out the Certified terminology) Set that is now available on Archive.org (<https://archive.org/details/ChristmasSingWithBingBroadcasts>) for anyone in the mood for some holiday Bing.



## Wistful Vistas

### From the Editor's Desk

Ryan Ellett

We are knee-deep into 2019 by the time you read this. I hope your new year is off to a good start. As always, thank you for taking time to peruse the latest issue of the *Old Radio Times*.

I could not be more pleased to welcome the esteemed Karl Schadow to our pages. Among the most respected historians in the old-time radio field, Mr. Schadow, winner of FOTR's 2011 Ray Stanich Award brings his wealth of experience with *Murder at Midnight* to bear this quarter. As mentioned last time, it was a bit of a fluke that our set of this series (produced many years ago) was brought to everyone's attention. What might have been a minor issue has now turned into a major re-issuing of the set accompanied by the reflections of Mr. Schadow.

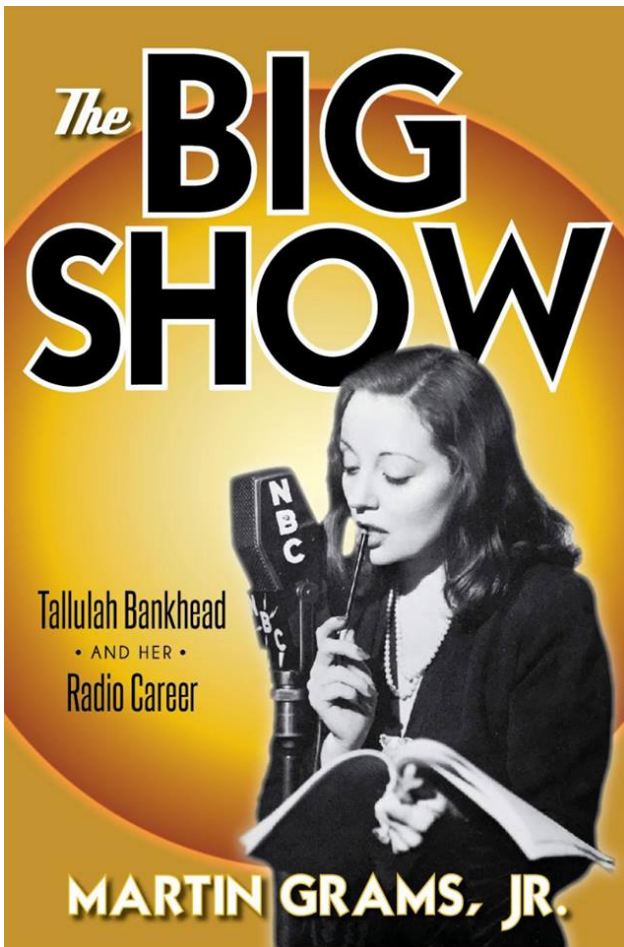
It's always exciting to introduce a new writer to our readers, and in this issue we debut the work of Trav SD (actually, Donald Stewart). Mr. Stewart has been writing and blogging about entertainment mediums for many years and has recently started sharing some of his OTR-related blog posts on the group's Facebook page. He has graciously given us permission to reprint some of his older.

You'll also find short news bits about the group's spontaneous collection of holiday Bing this past Christmas season and Martin Grams' groundbreaking effort to raise funds to release beautiful copies of *The Big Show*.

As I write this, several inches of snow has piled up outside my window. By the time we gather again, we'll be enjoying the warm spring sun!



## Grams Kickstarts Bankhead



In the first known use of the Kickstarter crowd-funding platform for an old-time radio project, historian and author Martin Grams ran a campaign to both offer pre-orders of his new book about Tallulah Bankhead and to raise capital to release all known episodes of *The Big Show* in sparkling sound from original masters.

The results? A whopping 275% funding level that Grams has declared will allow him to also make available additional un-circulating old-time radio broadcasts in the near future, including episodes of *The Shadow*, *Suspense*, and *The Witch's Tale*! Great news for Grams, this also bodes well as a new funding mechanism to allow holders of rare (and often expensive) transcription discs to recoup their costs and make fresh material available to fans.

## *Calvin and the Colonel: The Reincarnation of Amos 'n' Andy* Reviewed by Martin Grams

In the fall of 1961, a new half-hour animated cartoon made it primetime network, one year after *The Flintstones* premiered as the first primetime animated cartoon series for network television, and the networks were all scrambling to compete. The series was *Calvin and the Colonel*, the creation of Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll, produced by Kayro Productions in association with MCA-TV/Revue Studios. The cartoon was anything but new; it was the reincarnation of Gosden and Correll's *Amos and Andy* radio program, also voiced by Gosden and Correll.

Colonel Montgomery J. Klaxon, a shrewd fox and Calvin T. Burnside, a dumb bear, were the central figures (ala Kingfish and Andy). Their lawyer was Oliver Wendell Clutch, who was a weasel (literally). The colonel lived with his wife, Maggie Belle, and her sister Sue, who never trusted the colonel. Colonel Klaxon was in the real estate business, but always tried a number of get-rich-schemes with Calvin's unwitting help.

Several of the radio scripts were adapted for use on the animated series, with minor revisions to character names and locale. Because of low ratings (not because of complaints from Southern television stations as rumors commonly and falsely assert), the program was cancelled after two months. The series returned later in the season to complete the terms of the contract.

Lever Brothers, makers of Rinso Soap, sponsors of the radio program, bought time slots for the animated rendition and their contract was for 26 half-hour episodes. Reruns were later aired on

Saturday mornings, syndicated across the country afterwards, but the minimal number of episodes handicapped syndication success.

Because Joe Connelly and Bob Mosher, script writers for the radio program and the animated series, also produced television's *The Munsters*, a brief clip from one of the episodes can be seen on a television set in the 1966 episode, "A Visit from

Comic book fans know of the two *Calvin and the Colonel* Dell Comics that were published in 1961, highly sought after by fans of *Amos and Andy*.

The episodes "supposedly" fell into the public domain, copyrights never renewed after the 28-year initial issuance. Twelve of these episodes have been floating about in collector hands from 16mm masters, a few easily found on YouTube and a few recently released commercially with a company logo superimposed on the screen, along with the addition of sound effects to the sound track to brand the altered version. (Before purchasing any episodes, ask the vendor if their copies are "un-altered.")

Of recent a new book was published through Jerry Beck's Cartoon Research publishing label, written by historian Kevin Scott Collier. Documenting as much information about the television series as possible, Collier explores the two animated *Amos n' Andy* cartoons produced by Van Beuren in 1933 (which have recently received restoration through Thunderbean DVD), and the radio program for which *Calvin and the Colonel* originated.

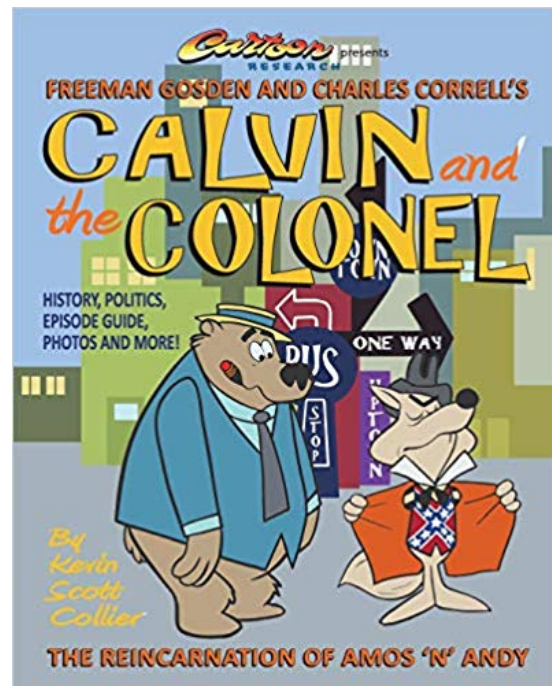
Publicity photos, budgets, the NAACP controversy, artist model sheets for the characters, and much more can be found in this book. Godson's recollections are quoted, and reprints of episode promotional synopsis were scanned and reprinted.

After reading the book I was pleased to learn things I did not know about the television program. I knew the program was filmed in color but was unaware that ABC still telecast in black and white at the time so viewers never saw

the cartoons in color in 1961. There was a Calvin and the Colonel board game, "High Spirits," and two talking dolls produced by Mattel in 1962. There was also a coloring book which I am now seeking out on eBay this week. (Yeah, I was bitten by the collecting bug years ago when it comes to *Amos n' Andy*.) The 65-page book is available from Amazon.com and if you want to buy a copy, a link is provided below for your convenience. Fans of *Amos n' Andy* will want a copy of this book.

[Calvin and the Colonel: The Reincarnation of Amos 'n' Andy](#)

And for anyone wanting to watch the cartoons, they can get a three-disc set containing 12 half-hour episodes at [www.classicmoviesdvd.com](http://www.classicmoviesdvd.com).





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(Please note the date change.  
Showcase 2019 was originally scheduled for March 22-24.)

**Tickets are available at Brown Paper Tickets:**

<https://www.brownpapertickets.com/event/4090946>

If you prefer to pay by check, instructions will be posted  
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of Puget Sound

March 29-31  
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Plus interviews, panel  
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Radio Enthusiasts of Puget  
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<https://www.brownpapertickets.com/event/4090946>

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Created in 1984, the Metro Washington Old-Time Radio Club is the second largest old-time radio club in the United States. Club members enjoy monthly club meetings, an annual luncheon, and a bi-monthly newsletter. You do not have to live in or near Washington, D.C., to become a member. The newsletter, RADIO RECALL, is mailed to members from all over the country and loaded with fascinating articles, news of what is happening in the hobby, recently-discovered "lost" programs and more. Why not join the hundreds who enjoy the newsletter, which can be sent via email in PDF format, or be mailed to you through the post office?



You can sign up to become a member on the club website.

[www.mwotrc.com](http://www.mwotrc.com)



NOW AVAILABLE

\*\*\*\*\*

## Supplement #3

# The 5<sup>th</sup> Revised Ultimate History of Network Radio Programming and Guide to All Circulating Shows

\*\*\*\*\*

*Written by Jay Hickerson January, 2018*

Lists changes and additions to network programming and more theme songs

Lists many new dated shows in circulation with the source of every show.

**Cost of Supplement #3: \$15.00 incl. P&H**

**Cost of each previous Supplement: \$15:00 incl.  
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Cost of entire 625-page book with the Supplements: \$73  
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