



"Yoo hoo! Is Anybody?" A Visit with *The Goldbergs*

By Elizabeth McLeod

Sometimes we think we know what to expect in listening to a radio series.

And sometimes, everything we think we know is wrong.

Consider, for example, "The Goldbergs." What images come to mind?

A bustling neighborhood in the Bronx, heavy with ethnicity? Molly "yoo-hooing" down the dumbwaiter shaft to the unseen Mrs. Bloom? A show that's been described as "the first Jewish situation comedy," a show which was indeed defined by its ethnic characterizations?

That's how this long running program has been remembered over the years -- but the fact is, those memories are being colored more by recollection of the early television series than they are of the far-longer-running radio program. The fact is, for most of its years on radio; "The Goldbergs" was set in a small rural town. Molly and Jake and Sammy and Rosalie lived on a farm, not a city tenement. Their neighbors were the usual gallery of small town types. While not ignored completely, in this setting the "Jewish" aspects of the show were heavily downplayed.

And far from being a situation comedy, for most of its run "The Goldbergs" was, pure and simple, a

soap opera. A well-crafted, well-written, well-acted soap opera, but a soap opera nonetheless. There were comic moments, but they were far outweighed by the usual soap-opera theme of Romance Constantly Frustrated.

Recently, a run of more than five hundred episodes of "The Goldbergs" spanning the years 1941 through 1944 surfaced on the West Coast -- recordings of the daily serial episodes originally made for Canadian rebroadcast. These episodes offer, at long last, a detailed look at one of radio's most important, most overlooked, most misunderstood programs.

"The Goldbergs" was the work of one remarkable woman -- Gertrude Berg, one of radio's great authors. She was a woman who had carefully crafted a public image for herself, and then spent her entire working life living up to that image -- essentially blurring the line between the character she portrayed and the person she actually was.



Although she built her reputation portraying a lower-middle-class Jewish housewife, Berg had no personal experience with ghetto life. She was born to an upper-middle-class family, grew up in comfortable surroundings, was well-educated, and married a wealthy doctor. During the 1920s, Berg began to dabble in writing -- crafting short stories drawn from her memories of a colorfully-ethnic uncle, on whose tales of the ghetto

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she based many of her characterizations. In 1929, she made her first steps into radio, and by the end of the year she had sold "The Rise Of The Goldbergs" to NBC -- a homey drama built around family life, and the first of the legion of serial shows to achieve network success riding the coattails of "Amos 'n' Andy." For several years, in fact, the program was carried by Pepsodent, A&A's sponsor, in the time slot immediately following A&A -- and the two series even shared the services of announcer Bill Hay.



Legend has it that budgetary constraints forced Berg to play the leading role of Molly herself, but it's just as likely she never would have allowed anyone else to play the role anyway -- throughout her career, Berg's best known characteristic was her overwhelming confidence in her ability to interpret her own work. The rest of the cast was just as carefully chosen -- stage veteran James R. Waters took the role of Jake, and the children Sammy and Rosalie were portrayed by child actors Alfred Corn (aka Ryder) and Roslyn Silber. Affirming Berg's judgement on their abilities, this cast would remain intact for nearly sixteen years.

For its first five years, "The Goldbergs" was indeed a colorful drama of ghetto life, complete with Bronx setting and dialect-speaking neighbors. But by 1934, this setting was growing stale -- and, more significantly, the taste of listeners was shifting away from heavily "ethnic" program material. A new wave of serial programs had sprung up, with a heavy emphasis on WASPy middle-class characters -- and the popularity of "The Goldbergs" began to fade. To breathe new life into the series, Berg made a

momentous decision -- one which would shape her program for the rest of its years on radio. The Goldbergs packed up and left the Bronx.

They moved to the upstate farming town of Lastonbury, a rustic community in which Jake took a job as the manager of a mill -- and the storylines began to focus on the family's adjustment to its new surroundings. But the change came too late - Pepsodent dropped "The Goldbergs" during the summer of 1934, and aside from a brief, abortive revival in 1936, it was silent for the next three years. When the series was revived in 1937, it was as a Procter and Gamble daytime drama -- and the Lastonbury setting continued. By 1941, when the long run of surviving episodes begins, the town had become a well-established part of the storyline, the Bronx just a fading memory spurred by occasional letters to or from dear old Mrs. Bloom. The town itself took on a personality all its own -- far from being an idealized vision of small-town America, Lastonbury seems to be largely a nest of backbiters, gossips, schemers, and bigots.

By this stage in her evolution, Molly was a character best described as an endearing busybody -- completely unable to mind her own affairs. An almost obsessive matchmaker, she was well known among the townspeople for her interference in affairs of the heart -- which meddling often blew up in her face as often as it succeeded. Her husband Jake was a sputtering teakettle of a man -- a dyspeptic old grouch, constantly driven to the bicarbonate box by his wife's behavior. And by this time, the two children had all but grown up -- Sammy had matured into an earnest college student with high hopes for the future, and Rosalie had developed from a gum-cracking teenager into a confused young woman, never quite sure what she wanted out of life, and just a bit oppressed by her smothering mother.

Added to this core were several important supporting characters -- the French war widow Orianne and her little son David, refugees seeking a new life in America, the moody, jealous Doctor Cater and his uptight, socially-prominent family, the brooding ex-convict Mr. Way, and the awkward teenager Seymour Fingerhood -- eternally tormented by his unrequited crush on Rosalie: who knew how he felt and really didn't care.

Berg's scripts seamlessly weave these characters together, although her plotting is sometimes a bit baroque: What happens when Mr. Way and Orianne decide to go into the poultry-farming business

together, and Way falls in love with the lovely young widow, even though she thinks she loves Dr. Cater but really doesn't and agrees to marry Cater in hopes of discouraging Way's affections because she thinks he wants to get back together with his ex-wife? Add Molly's incessant meddling to the mixture, and you've got a story line that's likely to increase Jake's



bicarb consumption by a factor of ten, at least.

But it works. The characterizations are nothing if not sincere, and Berg herself makes Molly, with all her faults, into a truly likable character. Waters' portrayal of Jake manages to be both dramatically tense and subtly comic -- as often as he flies off the handle you get a sense that underneath it all he's really rather bemused at his wife's antics, and the grouchiness of the characterization never becomes a caricature. Corn and Silber actually grew up playing Sammy and Rosalie, and their genuinely brother-and-sister relationship is one of the most touching elements of the series. They bicker and fight and tease like real siblings always do -- but they also care deeply about each other and are always ready to help in times of crisis. You never get a sense that these two are acting -- they seem that much like actual siblings.

Mention should also be made of Arnold Stang's excellent work in the role of Seymour. In many ways, it's the epitome of all the bespectacled-little-nebbish roles that Stang would play over his fifty-year career, but at the same time, Seymour never falls into mere stereotyping. While he's basically a comedy-relief figure, Stang plays the part with a very gentle sort of vulnerability -- especially in his awkward, stammering scenes with Rosalie. Perhaps Stang's most impressive scene in the series is when he tells Jake -- who doesn't really like Seymour at all -- that he's enlisted in the Navy.

He delivers his lines with a quiet conviction -- a sense of "now you'll have to respect me, but I don't care any more if you do or not" -- that actually had me applauding.

Berg's attention to detail in this series has entered into radio legend -- and these legends, at least, are all true. She really *did* give Roslyn Silber an on-air shampoo when the script called for such a scene -- and Silber's sputtering ad-libbed protests as the soap gets in her eyes give that scene a compelling sense of realism. The manufactured sound effects are equally notable -- a decade before "Gunsmoke," Berg's sound crew was experimenting with the same sort of multi-layered background effects that made Dodge City such a richly-detailed place -- right down to the dog barking off in the distance. A scene in which the Goldbergs visit a bowling alley is one of the most vivid I've ever heard -- the constant murmur of voices in the background with just the right sense of echo, the balls rolling down the alley to strike the pins, and then rolling back on the ball return, the squeak of shoes against hardwood, the occasional cheers from onlookers. This background was probably recorded live at an actual bowling alley -- and it blends flawlessly into the broadcast, with the characters moving in and out of the echoing background in an impressive display of engineering technique. It's the sort of scene best heard through headphones, where you can really appreciate the work that's gone into creating this little slice of atmosphere.

James Waters died in 1945, and was all but irreplaceable as Jake. The series itself ended shortly after, and didn't return until 1949 - this time retooled into the well-remembered situation comedy format. This series was a radio version of the already popular TV series -- and it took the family back to the beginning, losing in the process the subtle characterizations that made the original series so memorable. Lastonbury was gone as though it had never happened -- once again, the Goldbergs lived in the Bronx, complete with dumbwaiter shaft and Mrs. Bloom. Sammy and Rosalie were suddenly children again -- a bit implausible, given the fact that Berg herself was well into her fifties by this time. And Jake was now played by Broadway actor Philip Loeb -- who does manage to capture the lovable crustiness of Waters' portrayal without trying to slavishly recreate the original characterization.

But appreciation of the later series is marred by the overwhelming tragedy of Loeb's own life -- a

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TAPE 1579 THE WEIRD CIRCLE [1943 - 1947]

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- 1L 42: The Ghost's Touch
 43: The Bell Tower
- 2L 44: The Evil Eye
 45: The Mark Of The Plague
- 1R 46: The Queer Client
 47: The Burial Of Roger Malvin
- 2R 48: The Fatal Love Potion
 49: The Mad Monkton

TAPE 1580 THE WEIRD CIRCLE [1943 - 1947]

1200'

- 1L 50: The Returned
 51: The Executioner
- 2L 52: Rappaccini's Daughter
 53: The Wooden Ghost
- 1R 54: The Last Day Of A Condemned Man
 55: The Warning
- 2R 56: The Doll
 59: The Duel Without Honor

TAPE 1581 THE WEIRD CIRCLE [1943 - 1947]

1200'

- 1L 60: The Specter Bride
 61: The Tapestry Horse
- 2L 62: The River Man
 63: The Ancient Mariner
- 1R 64: The Oblong Box
 65: The Mysterious Bride
- 2R 66: The Thing In The Tunnel
 67: The Moonstone

TAPE 1582 THE WEIRD CIRCLE [1943 - 1947]

1200'

- 1L 68: The Pistol Shot
 69: The Possessive Dead
- 2L 70: The Goblet
 71: The Case Of Monsieur Valdemar
- 1R 72: The Shadow
 73: The Bride Of Death
- 2R 74: Dr. Jekyll And Mr. Hyde
 75: The Red Hand

TAPE 1583 THE WEIRD CIRCLE [1943 - 1947] / BAND REMOTES**1200'**

- 1L 76: WEIRD CIRCLE: The Haunted House
77: WEIRD CIRCLE: Markheim
- 2L 1932 78: WEIRD CIRCLE: The Black Parchment [Last Show]
1932 JIMMY GRIER AND ORCHESTRA: 1st: Parade Of The Puppets
JIMMY GRIER AND ORCHESTRA: 1st: I Need Lovin
- 1R 01-20-36 BENNY GOODMAN AND ORCHESTRA: 1st: Farewell Blues
02-03-36 BENNY GOODMAN AND ORCHESTRA: 1st: Dodging A Divorcee
- 2R 03-27-53 STAN KENTON AND ORCHESTRA: 1st: Walking Shoes
03-29-53 STAN KENTON AND ORCHESTRA: 1st: Portrait Of A Count

TAPE 1584 BIRDSEYE OPEN HOUSE**1200'**

- 1L 10-21-43 1st: I'll Be Home For Christmas
10-28-43 1st: Thank Your Lucky Stars
- 2L 12-16-43 1st: Paper Doll
12-23-43 1st: Exactly Like You
- 1R 12-30-43 1st: My Heart
02-10-44 1st: Sleepy Time Girl
- 2R 02-17-44 1st: Speak Low
02-24-44 1st: I Couldn't Sleep A Wink Last Night

TAPE 1585 BIRDSEYE OPEN HOUSE**1200'**

- 1L 01-09-44 1st: They Ask About You
03-23-44 1st: Take It Easy
- 2L 05-11-44 1st: Don't Sweetheart Me
05-18-44 1st: Love, Love, Love
- 1R 05-25-44 1st: You Must Have Been A Beautiful Baby
06-08-44 1st: Sleepy Time Gal
- 2R 06-15-44 1st: I'll Be Seeing You
06-29-44 1st: San Fernando Valley

TAPE 1586 BIRDSEYE OPEN HOUSE**1200'**

- 1L 09-27-45 1st: I'm Going To Love That Guy Like He's Never Been Loved Before
10-04-45 1st: A Kiss Goodnight
- 2L 10-18-45 1st: You Must Have Been A Beautiful Baby
10-25-45 1st: I'm Going To Love That Guy Like He's Never Been Loved Before
- 1R 11-01-45 1st: Waiting For The Train To Come In
11-08-45 1st: Put That Ring On My Finger
- 2R 11-22-45 1st: I Didn't Want To See You Again
01-03-46 1st: Aren't You Glad You're You

labor-oriented liberal active in the affairs of actors' unions, Loeb was tarred as a Communist by red-baiters in the early fifties and eventually was driven to commit suicide after Berg was forced to fire him from the show. It's difficult to listen to the few remaining episodes of this late run without being distracted by the knowledge of what happened behind the scenes to this gentle, decent man.

Gertrude Berg wasn't always an easy woman to work for. She had definite ideas on how she wanted the show to sound, and drove her cast mercilessly through rehearsals. But the finished product shows the results of this meticulous approach -- and the recovery of such a substantial portion of its run is one of the most significant OTR finds of the past decade.

Give "The Goldbergs" a try. It's not what you think. It's better.

Elizabeth McLeod is a journalist, researcher, and freelance writer specializing in radio of the 1930s. She is a regular contributor to "Nostalgia Digest" magazine and the Internet OldRadio Mailing List, maintains a website, Broadcasting History Resources, and is presently researching a book on Depression-era broadcasting. Elizabeth is always looking for 1930s radio recordings in all formats -- uncoated aluminum or lacquer-coated discs, vinyl or shellac pressings, or low-generation tape copies. You can contact her at lizmcl@midcoast.com

**From the Desk of
the Editor
by Carol Tiffany**



Here we are in February, and your Editor is still having trouble remembering to use 2004 rather than 2003 when dating correspondence. I think that comes from feeling as though we are living in the 1940s and '50s because we listen to so much OTR.

The next few issues of RWUN will be great fun because we have had some very interesting submissions from new and returning authors. Look for a really challenging brain teaser called "The OTR Code" from Jack Richards as well as Martin Grams' article on the transition of *Inner Sanctum Mysteries* from radio to television in our March issue.

April will feature a pictorial "Rogues' Gallery" quiz to test your knowledge of the actors who played detectives on OTR. Finally, we will have a very interesting feature article on the NBC chimes later this spring. All together a lot to look forward to in my opinion.

Happy Valentine's Day and Good Listening to all.....

RHAC Member Advertisements

From Sheila Harper - Denver CO:

I'm looking for a "Jack Benny" show, from about '51 or '52, that contained two street walkers. Please contact Maletha King at (303) 761-4139 or email to dickking@earthlink.net with any info that you might have. Thanks!

From Al Harding - Washington MO:

I have several repaired reel-to-reel tape decks that are available. I'm asking for only the cost of repairs and shipping. Interested parties can call me at, (636) 239-2182

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Ads are free to RHAC members and will normally run for one issue and as space permits. Please send your ads to Carol Tiffany, our newsletter editor, whose address, phone number and email is listed on page two.

The Trivial Matter of OTR Trivia

This quiz deals with general OTR knowledge. Some of these questions were used at RHAC's Christmas Party, but some are brand new. Good Luck, everyone!

- 1) On *The Halls of Ivy*, what was Victoria Hall's maiden name?
- 2) What was the name of *Lum 'n' Abner's* store?
- 3) On *Fibber McGee and Molly*, what was Mr. Wimple's wife's name?
- 4) *The Lone Ranger* rode Silver, Tonto rode Scout; what was the name of the horse ridden by the *Ranger's* nephew, Dan Reid?
- 5) At one point in the series, *The Great Gildersleeve* actually made it to the altar with Leila Ransom. Who stopped the wedding?
- 6) On *Gunsmoke*, what was deputy Chester's last name?
- 7) *A Voice in the Night* was an experiment in combining a musical variety program and a murder mystery drama. The singing detective who owned the Golden Oriole nightclub was....
- 8) Frank Chandler was also known as ...
- 9) In the late '30s, when Orson Welles intoned the famous "Who knows what evil LURKS in the hearts of men..." whose voice laughed?
- 10) The owner of the café Tambourine in Cairo was...
- 11) *Life with Luigi* always opened with three little words...
- 12) Who was *Mr. Keen's* assistant?
- 13) Who played "Liz" on *My Favorite Husband*?

14) & 15) Two pieces of classical music are forever associated with two OTR shows. What were the themes for *The Lone Ranger* and *The Green Hornet*?



New in the Tape Library

by Dick and Malettha King

Last month we started the "Weird Circle" series of shows. This is not a very good label as most of the shows are well known shows of intrigue with some murders thrown in just to make it more interesting. But only a few were really weird.

This month we continue "The Weird Circle" for half of the entrée and then move on to Dinah Shore being the delightful hostess on "Birdseye Open House". Dinah does lots of singing both solo and with the weekly guests on the show. It really reminds us of how talented she was.

Answers to the OTR trivia questions

- | | |
|-----|---|
| 15) | "The Flight of the Bumblebee" |
| 14) | "The William Tell Overture", and |
| 13) | Lucille Ball |
| 12) | Mike Clancy |
| 11) | "Dear Mama Mia..." |
| 10) | <i>Rocky Jordan</i> |
| | series) |
| 9) | Frank Readick (the <i>Shadow of the first two</i> |
| 8) | Chandu the Magician |
| 7) | Carl Brisson |
| 6) | Proudfoot |
| 5) | Her supposedly dead husband |
| 4) | Victor |
| 3) | Sweetface |
| 2) | The Jot- <i>em-down</i> Store |
| 1) | Victoria Cromwell |

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