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978-0-521-71777-9 - Mass Appeal: The Formative Age of the Movies, Radio, and TV

Edward D. Berkowitz

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## Mass Appeal

### *The Formative Age of the Movies, Radio, and TV*

*Mass Appeal* describes the changing world of American popular culture from the first sound movies through the age of television.

In short and accessible vignettes, the book reveals the career patterns of people who became big movie, TV, or radio stars. Eddie Cantor and Al Jolson symbolize the early stars of sound movies. Groucho Marx and Fred Astaire represent the movie stars of the 1930s, and Jack Benny stands in for the 1930s performers who achieved their success on radio. Katharine Hepburn, a stage and film star, illustrates the cultural trends of the late 1930s and early 1940s. Humphrey Bogart and Bob Hope serve as examples of performers who achieved great success during the Second World War. Walt Disney, Woody Allen, and Lucille Ball, among others, become the representative figures of the postwar world.

Through these vignettes, the reader comes to understand the development of American mass media in the twentieth century.

Edward D. Berkowitz is Professor of History at George Washington University. He has held academic positions at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, and administrative positions at Brandeis University and the President's Commission for a National Agenda for the Eighties. He is the author of six books, including *Something Happened*, his history of the 1970s. He is co-author of four other books and editor of three, including *A Documentary History of Social Security*.

Berkowitz has given invited lectures at the European University in Florence, at Oxford and Cambridge Universities, and in the Netherlands, Australia, and New Zealand. He has published more than 100 articles in publications including the *Journal of Social History*, the *Milbank Memorial Quarterly*, the *Boston Globe*, the *Washington Post*, and the *San Jose Mercury News*. His media work has also included appearances on Terry Gross's *Fresh Air*, C-SPAN's *Washington Journal*, and the History Channel. In 2009, he was a principal commentator in the AP-TV's coverage of the Obama inauguration.

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EDWARD D. BERKOWITZ

*George Washington University*



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*For my mother, Shalvo Berkowitz, the matriarch of the Schwartz family – with love and affection.*

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## Acknowledgments

As an only child in the baby boom, I had television as a daily companion. I bonded so closely with the set that I sometimes imagined I had been chosen at birth as the national television child. In this conceit, everything I did and every program I watched were televised on a special channel, something like the setup of the Jim Carrey movie *Truman*. That fantasy led to this book.

My parents also helped. My father bought a television set just before I was born, which meant that I was never without one. My parents took me to Broadway shows and other New York cultural attractions and shared their love of movies with me. On my thirteenth birthday, I received a ticket to see radio and television star Jack Benny perform live in a one-man show at the Ziegfeld Theatre on West 54th Street in New York City. After the performance, I got Benny's autograph as he left the theater, a fleeting but still direct connection with one of radio's greatest stars.

Like any kid who came of age in the 1960s, I played the radio all the time. Although I missed Jack Benny and radio's golden age, I caught a glimpse of the medium's potential by listening to Dan Ingram on WABC and John Gambling and Jean Shepherd on WOR.

My children have also helped. Before the birth of my first child, I went out and, in an unconscious homage to my father, bought a VCR. Its presence enabled me to share old movies and classic TV shows with my daughters, Sarah and Rebecca. Their enthusiasm reinforced my desire to write this book.

This project lies far outside my scholarly comfort zone. I am grateful to Donald Critchlow and to Lew Bateman of Cambridge University Press

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for giving me an opportunity to write the book. As always, George Washington University provided a supportive environment, from Dean Peg Barratt to my departmental chair Tyler Anbinder. Tyler very generously arranged for Chris Cullig and Bruce Rushing to help with some of the research and other tasks related to the book. Michael Weeks presided over the department with his usual efficiency and good grace. My friend Bill Becker took over as chair at the end of this project and lent his sympathetic support. I always had the feeling that he and all of my colleagues were rooting for me.

I am particularly indebted to three of my colleagues who took the time to read drafts and discuss this project with me. Richard Stott read the entire manuscript and gave me the benefit of his encyclopedic knowledge of the history of popular culture. Our discussions greatly improved the book. Leo Ribuffo, who encouraged me to write what he called my “crazy” book, also took the time to read the manuscript and to make perceptive and helpful comments. Both Richard and Leo would have done a much better job if they had written this book themselves, but both lent gracious support to me. My Trachtenberg School colleague Chris Sterling allowed me to tap some of his considerable expertise and generously read the manuscript with great care.

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