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Life is Worth Giving

"SPEAKING OF RADIO" REMINDS LISTENERS OF PAST GOLDEN AGE

Those who grew up in the U.S. in the so-called "Golden Age of Radio" from 1930-50, usually have fond memories of that era. Radio, it is often argued, was the first mass media that actually brought the American people together to share common experiences, to debate political and social questions of the times, and enjoy a plethora of great entertainment. Literally millions of Americans in those days shared the comic antics and comments of Jack Benny and his cast of characters, Fibber McGee and Molly and their greatly overcrowded closet, Fred Allen and his many strolls down Allen's Alley, plus enjoying the many "revolting developments" in the Life of Riley.

In addition, many listened to the great music and drama presented over the networks each week. Classical music of opera came from the Metropolitan Opera House in New York, along with the lighter fare from Bing Crosby's Kraft Music Hall, and the thrilling voice of Kate Smith as she sang her theme song "God Bless America."

Other hours of radio were dedicated to drama and mystery shows such as the Screen Guild Playhouse, plus "Suspense" and "Inner Sanctum."

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And in the tragic years of the Great Depression, radio provided free entertainment to millions of Americans through the courtesy of commercial sponsors. There were also the famous "Fireside Chats" of President Franklin Roosevelt who admonished us that we had "nothing to fear but fear itself." He gave listeners ^(STRENGTH) in time of doubt and poverty, and carried us through World War II with the hope and courage present in his voice.

Radio also brought us news of near and far was witnessed by the voice of Edward R. Murrow from London during the "Blitz" of World War II. Other correspondents kept us informed of the progress of the Allies during that war. And religious programs such as "The Catholic Hour" by the then Msgr. Fulton J. Sheen provided listeners with faith and hope in dark and sad times, and in good ones, too.

This time of radio's past great age is quickly fading from consciousness and memory. But a delightful book entitled "Speaking of Radio" by Chuck Schaden, who hosts a weekly Saturday program of old time radio on 90.9-FM, has captured many of the former stars and their memories of this more than enjoyable time.

Originally gathered by Schaden as taped interviews over several decades, the speakers give great insights into what has been referred to well as "The Theater of the Mind."

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Through scripts, sound effects, the voices of the actors, and the imagination of the listeners, any audience could be easily transported to other places and times for exciting adventures or enchanting music. Many of those who listened to Mercury Theater's "War of the Worlds" in the late 1930s actually thought the U.S. was really being invaded from the Planet Mars. The realism of the program brought actual panic to residents of the New York City area, New Jersey, and other places.

In a delightful and encouraging way, author Chuck Schaden permits each star of old time radio to present experiences and insights of this great national pastime.

Kate Smith, for example, ~~was~~ got her start with Columbia Records and then began a decades-long radio show with CBS and became a favorite with a vast American audience. The reader also learns how Edgar Bergen, creator of Charlie McCarthy and other memorable characters, got his first real break as a ventriloquist-turned-comedian on singer Rudy Vallee's Show.

Other interviewees include Eve Arden who became one of America's best-known English teachers on "Our Miss Brooks" show; Jim Jordan of "Fibber McGee and Molly"; Harold Peary of "The Great Gildersleeve" show; Dennis Day, the favorite singer of Jack Benny's program; and Harriet and David Nelson of the "Ozzie and Harriet" show. Others to be met in this fine collection include Bret Morrison of "The Shadow"; and Ezra Stone of "The Aldrich Family" and many more.

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A total of 46 radio personalities share their experiences and memories of an era which brought much entertainment to the American public, and all for free.

The author, who is also editor of "Nostalgia Digest" of Morton Grove, Ill., clearly appreciates and enjoys his subject matter and the people who created it. He has done much to preserve ~~with the passage of time~~ so much that was good and great in the Age of Radio. And even those who were not a part of that era, plus those who are today considered Senior Citizens, will find much to inform and enjoy in the pages of this fine memoir of days gone by — but not entirely forgotten.

SPEAKING OF RADIO by Chuck Schaden. Morton Grove, IL:
Nostalgia Digest Books, 2003, 410pp., \$27.