

Bob and Ray

A Rocky Start on Network Radio
and Television in 1951 By David Pollock



Bob Elliott (left) and Ray Goulding in old-time radio days

Photofest

The comedian Fred Allen observed that in 1949 “television was already acting provocatively, trying to get radio to pucker up for the kiss of death.”

By 1951, to finance their fledgling television operations, the networks were dependent on the less and less deep pockets of their radio divisions. But as the television audience rose, radio’s dropped proportionately, forcing the companies to cut their radio advertising rates. Ironically, by subsidizing the birth of television, radio was speeding up its own death.

It was in the middle of these countervailing forces that NBC’s brand-

new radio comedy team of Bob and Ray – Bob Elliott and Ray Goulding – were to find themselves that October. They were only in their fourth month of national network exposure with a daily 15-minute late-afternoon show at 5:45 plus an hour Saturday-night program. The prominent 6:00–8:30 early morning spot on the network’s New York flagship, WNBC, had been added in late August.

In Elliott and Goulding’s corner was another hard working team: enthusiastic agent and manager John Moses, from the powerful GAC talent agency, and 39-year-old, ruddy, NBC vice president Charles C. “Bud” Barry.

If that October Barry was feeling

confident about his new comedy team, he had good reason to be. Critical response had been mostly favorable: The *Herald Tribune's* esteemed radio and TV columnist John Crosby had praised their “deadpan, deadly satire” while *Variety* had called the two “the brightest pair of young comics to hit the web in some time.”

As television performers, Elliott and Goulding were funny, irrepressible and endearing. But what they weren't was experienced.

Moses and Barry now contemplated adding to Elliott and Goulding's grueling 17-and-a-half hours a week of airtime by exposing their unique tongue-in-cheek style to television. The fact that they had absolutely no background in television was of less significance than might be assumed. In 1951, nobody did.

The only question was where on NBC's schedule to put the team. Improbably, the answer suddenly appeared when two advertisers dropped their partial sponsorship of another popular team, *Kukla, Fran and Ollie*.

The delightful “Kuklapolitan Players” and their revered creator, Burr Tillstrom, had been fixtures in the Monday through Friday, 7:00–7:30 time slot since 1948. Nevertheless, in November of 1951 a decision was made to cutback *Kukla, Fran and Ollie* to 15 minutes with a new *Bob and Ray Show* taking over at 7:15.

Predictably, Tillstrom was not happy. And it didn't help him stomach the

change when he inadvertently learned of the decision in a phone conversation with the manager of NBC's Milwaukee affiliate who referred to a company memo identifying the new show only as having “better audience appeal.”

The press was quick to pounce, *Variety* headlining its story: “Bob & Ray As Kukla TV Mates.”

A particular pre-production concern was how to transplant the team's popular *Mary Backstayge* and *Linda Lovely* daily soap opera parodies to the new medium. On this score, according to Elliott, “we had a lot of anxiety.” In addition to the listeners, he and his partner, too, had pictured the characters in their own minds for years. But now, those mental images would obviously be shattered.

“Ray was going to do Mary or Linda Lovely somehow, we didn't know,” Elliott recalled recently. “And then we said, ‘You know, we've got to have a real character – a real person.’”

Ultimately, the compromise was to hire an actress for the part, but not have her speak. Linda would only be a visible presence as the other characters talked about and around her.

After interviews with several actresses, the team's TV producer, Pete Barnum, settled on the young, pretty daughter of an Episcopal missionary in China, Audrey Meadows.

Recalling the interview in her autobiography, *Love, Alice*, Meadows wrote, “...With being out of work adding to my nervousness, I went into my nonstop spiel, babbling along, cascades of words, words, words ... Bob hesitatingly raised a hand. I paused to inhale. ‘Do you think you could start on Monday?’ he asked.

On opening night, November

26, 1951, the *Kukla, Fran and Ollie* audience had no difficulty discerning Burr Tillstrom's state of mind. Mocking his new, enforced trimmed format, Ollie ordered his fellow Kuklapolitans to talk at a rapid fire pace in order to preserve precious time. Thus was the lead-in to the TV premiere of *The Bob and Ray Show*.

That first show, with music provided by the organ stylings of courtly, dapper Paul Taubman, opened with a parody of the then popular *Lights Out* program. Next, Goulding, in his patented character of Mary McGoon, offered a recipe for frozen ginger ale salad, which called for the cubing of a marshmallow.

The McGoon segments were shot as if looking through the frame of a picture window into her "experimental kitchen," with Mary (Goulding in a dress) only visible from the top of her apron to her waist. As she went about her various cooking demonstrations, director Doug Rodgers would cut to a close-up of just her hands (unmistakably Goulding's) as she prepared frankfurters for Valentine's Day or demonstrated how to keep meatballs hot after they reach the table by knitting a meatball cozy out of spaghetti.

The first TV installment of the always ad-libbed *The Life and Loves of Linda Lovely* followed. True to the plan, Audrey Meadows had no dialogue. Other characters would only refer to Linda as she went about various stage business, such as feeding an "exotic rubber plant, unaware it was really deadly nightshade;" or, stretched out on a couch, napping between them, her arms flailing about as she slept.

But, inevitably, this device would

prove unwieldy, to say nothing of being a waste of Meadows' talent. So by the second week, it was decided to have Meadows speak. "Audrey fell into the whole bit beautifully," recalled Goulding's widow, Liz. "And after she got her voice – or was able to use her voice – it was a funny voice, too."

At the same time, announcer

"It looks like amateur night in West Newton!"

Bob Denton was added. His sober, businessman's visage, but wry delivery, introduced many of the sketches.

A tight budget and the limitations of a live show demanded simple sets and a minimum of ambitious physical or visual components. Thus a contest parody in which viewers were asked, "How would you like to own one of the Great Lakes?" simply required the two sitting behind a desk on which were placed five different sized glass fishbowls containing goldfish swimming in water ("flown in from each of the Great Lakes courtesy of Sturdley Airlines").

With this reliance on the verbal rather than the visual, which, of course, played to Elliott and Goulding's strengths, many of the new radio sketches were now adapted for television.

According to Elliott, with so many hours of radio airtime to fill, initially there had been concern at the network level and with "Barry, particularly, [about] 'this ad-lib stuff they're doing.' ... I think a lot of them said, rightly, 'How can these guys keep it up?' Or, 'They can't keep it up.' Barry did have a meeting with us and John and Mitch Benson, his second in command, and [NBC executive] Les

Harris. He said, 'You know, you're going to need writers.'

Barry's first choice was a recently semi-retired New Englander then living in Salem, Mass., Raymond Knight, who had been a major radio star and broadcasting trailblazer of the 1930s with his long running, *The Cuckoo Hour*. It had been broadcasting's first send-up of itself.

Besides starring in the show, Knight also created, directed and wrote it, as he did numerous other projects, including *Wheatenville*, a popular program of family life. Both *The Cuckoo Hour* and *Wheatenville*, serendipitously, had been boyhood favorites of, as well as major influences on, Elliott and Goulding.

Knight's keen ear for the conventions of broadcasting and, particularly, the inanities of advertising lingo, soon became evident in various new Bob and Ray take-offs of contemporary programs and commercial parodies. ("...The Flash Loan and Collection Service enables you to borrow money with the left hand and repay it with the right in practically one simultaneous motion.")

Perhaps Knight's most popular commercial spoof was for an enigmatic little item called Woodlo, "the new wonder product." The audience never knew its use. Its only reason for being was solely as something to be advertised. It was Madison Avenue to the ultimate: a commercial in search of a product. ("Remember, Woodlo not only can, but it does. And it's immunized!"). "He'd been agency oriented all his life," said Elliott. "So he knew it inside and out."

If there ever was any resentment on Knight's part, having once been a top star now suddenly a writer for two network upstarts, Elliott and Goulding never saw it. "He was always gracious," Elliott said, though he had heard Knight once remarked to a friend, "They're doing everything I did 20 years ago."

As on radio, Elliott and Goulding's television personas were basically identical – perfect counterweights. Neither was a straight man, both could be funny and do any number of voices and accents.

The team's ingenuous, matter-of-fact manner, with never a hint that they thought what they were doing was funny, made each premise all that more sublimely ridiculous, as when the two announced their campaign to move the celebration of the 4th of July to November 1st, to avoid the hot, muggy weather, ("an idea that we feel needs public support, before going to higher authorities").

As television performers, Elliott and Goulding were funny, irrepressible and endearing. But what they weren't was experienced. Unlike entertainers who had come out of vaudeville, they were not polished sketch actors. They were now forced to deal with physical movement, camera angles, props and cue cards. It was learning on the job.

In March of 1990 Ray Goulding died after a 12-year battle with kidney disease.

"I remember them drawing chalk marks on the floor for where they were supposed to stand," his widow, Liz Goulding, recalled. "And they were kidding about, 'We can't look

down and see where were supposed to stand.’ ”

Years later, looking back on those shows, Liz recalled her husband being “appalled at how really naïve they were about what to wear and how to appear.” She said, “He didn’t like to have some of the older shows reviewed because it was infancy for television. He felt they were very unprofessional. I think Bob felt that way, too.”

“We were kids,” Elliott agreed. “They’re embarrassing. But [from] a mindset of when it was in the life of TV, that really was inventing television. We knew we were on what would be the biggest thing since movies, but we didn’t know it was the golden age or whatever we were.”

This uneven, seat-of-the-pants quality was not lost on the critics. While John Crosby’s review in the *New York Herald Tribune* was overwhelmingly positive, referring to the teams “special essence” and “exquisite parodies,” he also noted that “Bob and Ray will have to get a little used to television.”

The influential Jack Gould in the *Times* was not so kind, writing that “Bob and Ray tried hard, to be sure, but it looks as if they are in over their heads.” Gould called their efforts “incredibly inept” and “monstrously unfunny.” “*Kukla, Fran and Ollie* trimmed from a half hour,” started the lead sentence of *Variety*’s critique, which went on to report that Elliott and Goulding were victims of “jitters” and “unfamiliarity with a new medium.” Jack O’Brien in the *New York Journal American* wrote that Elliott resembled “a scared Buster Keaton” and Goulding “a convicted

Thomas Dewey.”

In his vast corner office at NBC in Rockefeller Plaza, Bud Barry and his lieutenants Mitch Benson and Leslie Harris were in total shock. Barry, a blustery, larger-than-life-size man with a hearty if somewhat vulgar manner, announced, “It looks like amateur night in West Newton!”

It was a line that would forever reverberate in Elliott and Goulding’s psyches and find its way into the team’s routines for decades; frequently in reaction to the *Mary Backstage* troop’s numerous opening-night debacles.

Barry took immediate action. It was quintessential network-think. His quick-fix remedy was to hire a mentor and tutor to advise his new team on humor. If that wasn’t ignominious enough for Elliott and

Jack Gould of *The New York Times* called their efforts “incredibly inept” and “monstrously unfunny.”

Goulding, his selection to be their comedy guru, inexplicably, was not a television expert, but a retired radio pioneer from the crystal-set era named Phillips Carlin who had been on staff way back before there even was an NBC.

After returning from World War I, Phillips Carlin had worked in the silk business before starting with station WEAJ in 1923, three years before it was absorbed into the newly formed National Broadcasting Company. Primarily a sportscaster, he was long associated with the fabled Graham McNamee, with whom he broadcast three World Series in the 1920s.

If Phillips Carlin had any comedy credentials, they completely escaped Elliott and Goulding. It seems Carlin, who had left NBC years earlier, was long owed a favor. It was the “friendship angle,” Elliott recalled. “They threw him a bone ... We had to have breakfast with him once a week, every Tuesday morning...and he would tell us what we did wrong on this bit or that bit. We used to dread that morning. We’d do the local morning show and then go down to the drugstore there at Radio City, Cromwell’s ...He would come in with specific notes. ...I seem to remember he always wore an overcoat and an old-fashioned sports announcer’s type snap-brim fedora, which he always kept on. ...He was a pleasant enough guy but square as all get out.”

Through that winter, Elliott and Goulding, still in their late 20s, dutifully reported to the same booth at Cromwell’s on Sixth Avenue every Tuesday morning. During one breakfast, Elliott remembered, referring to a previous night’s sketch that had called for Audrey Meadows, supposedly unnoticed by the team, to make an entrance on roller skates, Carlin pointed out: “‘You had the girl come in on roller skates and you didn’t mention it.’ He didn’t get it. He couldn’t figure out why she came skating through...It was such a chore for us. [But] we were obeying orders.”

Reflecting on those long-ago Tuesdays, Liz said, “They would come home holding their heads.” She also remembered her husband leaving for those breakfasts and his ruefully commenting, “This will be another interesting one.”

“They couldn’t stand it,” recalled Ann Goulding King, Goulding’s younger sister,

then just 20, who had started that August as the team’s secretary. Ann’s specific instructions whenever Carlin should call were that they “weren’t there.” Frequently his calls came from downstairs at Cromwell’s, announcing, “‘They haven’t shown up,’” she said. “‘Well, I’ll see if I can find them.’ And they never would call back if they could avoid it.”

One time, recounted Ann, Carlin finally told the two, “‘You have a very stupid secretary. She never gives you my messages.’”

In addition to Carlin’s weekly comedy lectures, Pete Barnum invited stand-up comic Jackie Miles, an equally incongruous choice, but for different reasons, to attend the show’s rehearsals and then impart his advice. Intuitively “we knew this was wrong,” said Elliott.

Miles was an excellent monologist and a particular favorite of fellow comics. Skinny, downtrodden, with a soft, shaky voiced delivery, his material usually centered on hard-luck losers at the track and in life. One of his classic lines concerned a sad sack cashing his one-cent relief check. “How do you want it?” asked the teller. “Heads or tails?”

In persona, style and material, however, Miles was the complete antithesis of Elliott and Goulding. They were satirists and he was a storyteller.

The first meeting took place in the mezzanine of NBC’s cavernous, old Center Theater. During the rehearsal for that evening’s show, Miles stayed by himself and watched intently. When it was over, as Elliott and Goulding cooled their heels, he went off in a corner and huddled with Moses and Barnum. “Afterwards, John said, ‘Well, he didn’t have much to offer,’” Elliott recalled. “Nothing!”

It was the first and last such meeting. To be fair to Miles, there’s a good chance he,

too, recognized the folly in trying to meld broadcasting and nightclub mentalities.

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The next issue of Television

Quarterly will reveal Elliott and Goulding's abrupt ending to one of their long-continuing serials and the appearance of 26-year-old Cloris Leachman in one of her earliest comedy roles as Mary Backstayge, Noble Wife. Also covered will be the team's celebrated advertising and animation enterprise, starting with their longest-running TV success as the voices of Bert and Harry Piel, the fictitious owners of a real brewery.



Bob Elliott (left) and Ray Goulding, by Al Hirschfeld

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