



Mort Drucker's Playbill cartoon of Bob (left) and Ray for their 1975 Broadway show.

Bob and Ray on Television:

A slow start and then a huge success in advertising:
Remember the Piel Brothers?

By David Pollock

Though known primarily for their highly celebrated, over 40-year radio career, almost forgotten is the fact that Bob and Ray (Bob Elliott and Ray Goulding), also played a significant role in television's infancy. The nightly *Bob and Ray Show* on NBC-TV featured a total of 75 minutes a week of live, back-to-back sketches, a creative output unheard of today.

Having explored the team's somewhat bumpy 1951 television debut, and the public's reaction to it, in the last issue of *Television Quarterly*, we now turn our attention to their subsequent struggles and their ultimate smashing success in advertising.

In January of 1952 Coby Ruskin was brought in as both producer and director. In addition to the nightly ad-libbed *Linda Lovely* soap opera spoofs,

head writer Ray Knight transplanted many segments from the team's NBC radio series, one of the most popular being the *Bob and Ray Overstocked Surplus Warehouse* offers. These hard sell pitches dealt with inventories of dubious merchandise, such as war surplus items returned from Cuba. ("...We have 124 full cases of canned corned beef, which are clearly stamped San Juan Hill, 1898, on the tops of the cans. If you do not find this corned beef all you had hoped it would be, just leave word with the executor of your estate to return the remaining cans to us.")

Do-it-Yourself Kits, such as the Bob and Ray Boomer Political Kit ("which comes with a list of explosive issues such as: 'Why is it that President Truman has his own personal airplane when little boys and girls have to walk to school?'") easily made the transition to television.

In February, the team's popular *Mary Backstage*, *Noble Wife* made its television debut; but, not until the continuing *Linda Lovely* plot was neatly resolved in one tidy episode when all characters were conveniently killed off. As with the previous *Linda Lovely* episodes, all action was confined to three extremely cramped sets: The *Backstage's* "luxuriously appointed Skunk Haven, Long Island living room" and backstage and stage door areas of the Summer Garden Theater, scene of *Lament of the Locust* ("by young playwright Greg Marlowe, secretly in love with Mary"). Audrey Meadows played both Harry's devoted wife, Mary, and his scheming leading lady, Jessica Culpepper.

The program continued through May 1st, then, following a two-month hiatus, retuned as a weekly Saturday

night half-hour summer replacement for *One Man's Family*. In NBC's eyes, the Saturday night half-hour show had one important element the fifteen-minute series lacked: a sponsor, Miles Laboratories.

Replacing Audrey Meadows, then on Broadway with Phil Silvers in *Top Banana*, was the former Miss Chicago of 1946, Cloris Leachman. "I just remember it was the hottest summer in my history in New York City," recounted Leachman. "And I was staying in an apartment... and there was no air conditioning and, oh, my God! I'd lie there with a wet towel over me and I couldn't sleep at all. ...So all summer long I was absolutely cuckoo-tired. And I'd go down there to do the show and I had no ability not to laugh. Being so tired, I couldn't control

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it. ...And they would start this sketch and I would just start laughing at them. Helpless! Helpless! ...You just beg for mercy."

Coby Ruskin split the directing duties on this series with Grey Lockwood. "Nobody was in-sync like those two guys," recalled Lockwood, "They just quickly picked up on each other when they were ad-libbing. One guy would have a character and the other would immediately step in with a counter-character. It was unbelievable - absolutely in sync."

"You never knew what they were going to do next," said Leachman. "We were live television. I didn't have any scary bones about it." Unlike their other television series, the material on the half-hour show, though satirical, reflected slightly less of a Bob and Ray vibe and tilted more to traditional variety-show sketches. Having twice as much time, the sketches (from Knight and, in succession, Tony Webster and Billy Friedberg) were often longer and, from a production standpoint, more ambitious. Some parodies contained musical numbers with special lyrics and choreography featuring vocals by Elliott, Goulding and Leachman, all backed by Alvy West's band.

Among the special mock offers was the Bob and Ray Shipwreck Kit, which included an inflatable island "with one friendly native" and a supply of beautiful bottles, "each one containing a message written by some of the world's greatest authors."

Cloris Leachman performed the Mary Backstayge and Jessica Culpepper roles as if they had been created for her. "I didn't know comedy," said Leachman. "It's silly business to me – funny business. ...I'm good at that. And that's perfect with them. That's just what they did."

"They imitated real people incredibly well," said Lockwood. "That ordinary quality. It was that combination of everyman speech and everyman's sound. ...There was no 'theater' about it at all. There was no 'theater' about anything they did."

An ill-conceived Elliott and Goulding television series was to follow – a 15-minute, 10:30 p.m. Tuesday night program called *Club Embassy*. The contrived setting was

a fictional nightclub (unabashedly named for sponsor P. Lorillard's Embassy Cigarettes) with the sketches introduced by hostess Julia Meade and performed for appreciative guests, who were, of course, paid extras, seated at tables.

The *Club Embassy* premiere featured a "scathingly funny satire," in the words of *Variety*, centered on Richard Nixon's famous "Checkers" speech. "We had a Boy Scout troop leader instead of Nixon," said Elliott. "The troop leader had been dipping into the funds." *Variety* however found fault with the simulated nightclub surroundings. "Whoever lined up the format...did NBC's zany comedy team dirt," it stated, claiming they were "almost straight-jacketed" by the phony concept. The "comics distinguished themselves... despite the show, certainly not because of it," said the review.

Concurrent with *Club Embassy*, in the late fall of 1952, Pat Weaver had called on the duo to add some comedy to his brand-new *Today* show, which was broadcast every morning from a street-level studio, actually a part of the RCA Exhibition Hall. Large windows facing onto West 49th Street enabled tourists and passersby to stop and watch the broadcast. Monday and Thursday mornings, *Today* host Dave Garroway would switch to Elliott who would proceed to interview Goulding as one of the gawkers. According to Elliott, one morning a call came from NBC senior programming executive, Niles Trammell, angrily wanting to know about "those two idiots outside. Doesn't the one guy know that he's talking to the same guy everyday?" And they had to explain, "Yeah, he knows."

On April 27, 1953, the team

appeared at yet another new time and day. This, their final NBC series, would run through September, Monday nights at 7:30 p.m. Since the program was only 15-minutes once a week, Elliott and Goulding assumed there was a good chance Meadows could again join them. However, her manager, the legendary “Bullets” Durgom, protective of her deal with the Gleason show, resisted. Words became heated and “an impasse was reached,” recounted Meadows in 1994. Gleason was summoned to rule from on high.

“Why do you want to do this, Aud?” he asked.

“Because when I needed a job, they took me on when they didn’t have to,” she said. “Now they need me.”

“That’s the best reason I know,” said Jackie. “I’ll be watching the show if it doesn’t run into the cocktail hour. Leave Alice here. Go be Audrey.”

The studios had just recently been converted from stables for carriage horses, a fact that on humid days made itself readily apparent.

This 1953 edition of the program didn’t have a sponsor, didn’t have a studio audience, in fact, really didn’t even have it’s own studio. “We would always be in the smallest studio, or in one corner of the biggest studio,” said director Grey Lockwood. “We were always running from one little theater to another.” On several occasions, NBC couldn’t provide a studio at all. During that summer, when it was still light at 7:30, the network originated the show

at various outdoor sites around the city, including Aqueduct racetrack, the Weehawken ferry slip, and the Polo Grounds, home of the then New York Giants baseball team.

Later that year *The Bob and Ray Show* originated from yet another new address: 7 West 66 Street, the home of The American Broadcasting Company. The studios had just recently been converted from stables for Central Park carriage horses, a fact that, according to Elliott, “on more humid days made itself readily apparent.”

Returning again to five nights a week, the new 15-minute ABC show aired at 6:45 p.m. for the entire 1953-54 season. The over two-year association with NBC, the network that had brought them to New York had, for the time being, come to an end. “We shifted our allegiance rapidly,” said Elliott. The nightly commitment made it impossible for Audrey Meadows, by then starting her second season with the Gleason show, to continue. Auditions were held and a 22-year-old shapely blonde named Marion Brash, whose only television experience was a few months on *Rocky Corbett Space Cadet*, was chosen to replace her.

This series introduced a new continuing serial, a medical spoof called *Hospital Corners U.S.A.*, later changed to *Hospital U.S.A.* (“A story of today, based on sickness and disease, reflected in the life of a small-town country doctor.”)

Brash played two roles: Dr. Greg Norton’s shrewish wife, Belle, and the sexy nurse, Eileen Dover. “Eileen Dover was a very buxom kind of nurse – bosomy,” explained Brash. “In other words, you put it all together, it’s ‘I leaned over.’”

An American Airlines ticket agent and aspiring comedy writer, Earle Doud, was hired, based on a 28-page sample script. "I'd characterize him as a big animal lover," Elliott said of Doud. "Every type of bit had a camel in it or something... We'd show up at four o'clock or whatever and, jeez, they'd be holding a camel outdoors." Doud put his stamp on the inherited Ray Knight templates. There were the tongue-in-cheek pleas for viewer's assistance, such as the time a group of Belgian Congo Head Hunters had been invited as guests: ("Unfortunately not being able to speak English, they arrived a month early. If you have an empty room in your house, you can be of service to us...").

Mock commercials were well represented, including The Bob and Ray Bank for convenience minded customers: ("...We had the safety deposit boxes built on the outside of the bank") and a personalized Bob and Ray Home Butter Printing Kit: ("Why should a hotel have their initials in the butter and not you?")

One evening, in the program's last segment, Goulding, as Mary McGoon, was demonstrating how to prepare octopus pie, or "octa-pie," as Mary called it. In so doing, Goulding, meaning to say "tentacles," inadvertently said "testicles." By the straight-laced standards of over a half-century ago, this was shocking to hear on television.

"The cameraman...was hysterical," recounted the team's secretary, Ann King. "And oh, did we get mail! Like, 'Oh, you should have seen the look on my great-aunt's face.' People had great things to say. ...They wouldn't even notice the difference today."

Hank Behar, then a 29-year-old ABC

The germination of a fabled advertising campaign and the creation of the Piel Brothers

lighting director, was never officially assigned to *The Bob and Ray Show*. However, being a huge fan, he made a point of regularly stashing himself in the control room and watching the program from a spot behind director Paul Burgraff.

"Truth be told, all the bits didn't work, just as they didn't in radio," Behar remembered. "But their charm was that they just went on as if nothing had happened. Above all, they were supremely gentle souls. You couldn't imagine either of them raising his voice or protesting if he was grievously overcharged by a mendacious sales clerk."

In the spring of 1955, when Elliott and Goulding returned to prime time as co-moderators of the Goodson-Todman ABC game show, *Name's the Same*, then in its fourth year, their paths had already crossed with a 26-year-old New Yorker and Dartmouth graduate named Ed Graham. A copywriter for advertising giant Young & Rubicam, Graham had been tasked with creating a campaign for one of the agency's regional beer clients; one, like many smaller breweries, forced to battle for market share one tier below the major national brands. In the northeast, these companies included New York area brewed Schaefer, Ballantine, Rheingold, Knickerbocker and, at, or near, the bottom, Y&R's flagging client, Piel.

"Ed was very brash," recalled his talented art director on the Piel's account, Jack Sidebotham, then 27.

“His persona was very much like Larry David. He would say outrageous things. ...He was truly a crazy person.”

Elliott, remembered Graham as “very self-assured, a little wild and a little ‘wise guy,’ at times.” The previous Piels campaign, an innocuous jingle and hard-sell pitch by veteran voice-over man Art Hannas (“Piels contains less NFS, non-fermented sugar!”) had been scrapped. In its place, Graham came up with the Piels Brothers – half-pint, bullying Bert and lanky, befuddled Harry – animated owners and pitchman of the brewery.

“If that sells beer, I’ll quit!”

(The actual firm had been founded by brothers William, Gottfried and Michael Piel in Brooklyn in 1883.)

The “genius of the idea,” said Sidebotham, was that Graham had created complete biographies of each. “Harry was the quiet, shy guy and Bert the bumptious, wise-apple kind of guy. The characters were developed even to the point of Ed making up where they went to high school and stuff like that...” [Harry was an all-Metropolitan forward on Brooklyn’s Samuel J. Tilden High School basketball team of 1921 (undefeated). Bert was at one time a Graham-Paige Motor Car distributor.] “...The Piels brothers were totally Ed’s imagination.”

Because the concept was so completely counter to conventional beer ads of the early black-and-white TV era (close ups of Pilsner glasses being filled with frothy heads tantalizingly dripping over the side) it was an almost impossible sell at the agency. “For the suits of the day,” said Sidebotham, “it seemed not dignified

enough for a big brewery to be selling the beer with these joker characters.”

Elliott would later remember a Y&R higher up, after looking at the storyboards, proclaiming, “If that sells beer, I’ll quit!”

Jobs at agencies were very tenuous, Sidebotham said. “If an account was lost, then there would be heads chopped.” When the chief executive on the Piels account totally rejected the Bert and Harry campaign, it went to a board of senior people from each department. Though three or four thought it was terrific, Sidebotham said, “the concept was so controversial, that a rare thing happened.” The final decision was left to Y&R’s chairman and CEO, Sigurd Larmon.

Larmon, with his dark suits and ever-present white carnation, which he had delivered everyday, resembled a bank president. He was considered “sort of a stuffy guy,” said Sidebotham, but was a “very good manager and advertising man. ...There was enough adversarial stuff going on with Bert and Harry that he was asked to pass judgment on it. He approved it – that was great!”

But there remained one more obstacle: “I took the first script, along with Jack Sidebotham’s storyboards, to Bob and Ray,” recalled Ed Graham. “I had heard their voices in my mind as I wrote the scripts. [But] our Y&R production people didn’t want Bob and Ray to play Harry and Bert. We had to audition forty teams, plus Mel Blanc playing both roles.”

“Ed’s idea really embodied them,” Sidebotham said. “The idea for the campaign and Bob and Ray were one and the same. ...But there was pressure from the senior people...suggesting

“Manifestly the two of them were put on earth to do Bert and Harry Piel”

other actors to do it. I remember Tony Randall was one of the first people we had to audition. The people who were doing that had no concept of the concept. Tony Randall is a wonderful actor but...”

“They had a lot of people try out for it,” Elliott said. “And we went back more than once. It narrowed down, I think, to us and Ed was pushing. I mean, Ed was adamant in his aims and he wanted us for that.”

Ultimately, according to Graham, after hearing their final audition, “Bob and Ray were unanimously selected.” Bert and Harry debuted in New York as radio spots in August of 1955, and on

television, produced by UPA Pictures, first in two test markets, Harrisburg, Pa., and Syracuse, N.Y. In December, they appeared in all Piel’s markets, radio and TV, in 20 and 60-second commercials.

“When we did the campaign as radio commercials,” Graham said, “they were a mild success. But with the same soundtracks and Jack Sidebotham’s visuals, suddenly everybody was talking about them. ... Jack had a natural warmth about him that he communicated in his work. Even an angry Bert became loveable when Jack drew him.”

“He was on the same wavelength as Ray and Ed and I,” Elliott said.

Bumbling their way through the blurbs, the endearing Bert (Goulding) and Harry (Elliott) mocked themselves and traditional advertising speak (“Throat wise, it’s delicious.”),



Jack Sidebotham

Jack Sidebotham, a co-creator of Harry and Bert Piel, created this reminiscence especially for Television Quarterly.

frequently addressing the audience as “consumers” and not above reminding them that “these commercials cost us a fortune.”

“As entertaining as those spots were, Bert was hard sell,” Elliott pointed out, referring to the cranky brother’s blustery pitches (Piels tastes best of all because it’s driest of all!). Coming from a little short, fat guy,” Elliott said, “it was the reverse of what we’re used to. So agreeable and acceptable – and that was part of Ed’s psychology. ... We give him full credit for Bert and Harry.”

The campaign became so popular that the brewery, inundated with requests, began publishing the commercials’ scheduled broadcast times and stations in Manhattan newspapers. One Piels promotion had Bert and Harry give away an actual island, with Elliott and Goulding on hand in the Bahamas to make the official presentation to the winner. By 1956 sales were up by 21 percent, according to *New York Daily News* reporter Jay Maeder, who, in reference to Elliott and Goulding, wrote, “Manifestly the two of them were put on Earth to do Bert and Harry Piel.”

The spots even poked fun at their own success. In the middle of one, a studio tour guide (Elliott) interrupts, telling his group, “This is Bert and Harry’s studio. They do beer commercials, which claim to be funny. The shrimp guy on the left acts very obnoxious and the big dumb guy gets everything mixed-up. Most of their gags are wearing thin now.”

When sales later couldn’t keep pace with Bert and Harry’s increasing popularity, the brothers struck back. In one spot, Bert scolded viewers, “Some of you – and you know who you are

– were laughing at our commercials and not buying our beer. The free ride is over! We have a new theme: ‘I’m laughing with Piels in my hand.’ What’s fair is fair.”

In the heels of the Piels success, which ran for six years plus a couple of revivals, Graham left Young & Rubicam, joining the comedy team to form Goulding–Elliott–Graham, the advertising enterprise which created national and regional commercial campaigns for other major advertisers, including Tip-Top bread, General Motors, Andersen’s Split Pea Soup, Alcoa, General Electric, Nationwide, Paper-Mate, and Calso Water, a San Francisco campaign that was on the air for ten years.

In March of 1990, Jack Sidebotham and his wife, Bernadette, were somewhere having a drink when they learned Ray Goulding had died. Sidebotham suddenly found himself doodling a drawing on a napkin of Harry, a tear on his cheek, standing next to a gravestone marked, “R.I.P., Bert” Coming from the grave was a balloon of Bert speaking, “Lighten up, Harry.”

Though not quite sure if Liz would find it appropriate, with Bernadette’s encouragement, Sidebotham went ahead and sent it to her. “She called me,” he remembered, “and said she had loved it and had copies made for all of the family.”

*David Pollock and his partner Elias Davis have written for The Steve Allen Show, Mary Tyler Moore, All in the Family, M*A*S*H, Cheers, Frasier and The Carol Burnett Show. They have won an Emmy, Writers Guild, Peabody and two Humanitas awards.*