

# STAGE

January, 1938: p. 37

Bing Crosby, W. C. Fields, Jack Benny, Al Jolson, Fibber McGee, Singing Sam, Clark Gable, Lou Holtz, Max Baer, Bob Burns, Tizzie Lish, Fred Allen, Bill Robinson, Joe Frisco, Maxine Sullivan, Charlie McCarthy, the Mad Russian, and Dozens of Other Great

# Americans

THE ONES who entertain are the ones who matter, and these, among others, entertain. They are all over the place: on the stage, in the newspapers, on the air, in orchestras, in movies, in newsreels, in the streets: the story-tellers in the pool-rooms, the street-corner comics, the university cut-ups, the unemployed wits. They are all Americans. The ones who are funny on purpose are the Americans who matter, not the ones who are funny accidentally. Not the big-wigs. Not the ones who fool themselves and try to fool the people.

The ones who fool themselves matter, but not as the others do. The ones who are fooling don't really matter because they come and go and the one gone is no different from the one freshly arrived. The machine *made* the fooling ones, but the *legend* made the ones who entertain. The American legend made them.

They count. They couldn't be in any region of the world except this. This region made them. The terrain of this region made them. The climate of this region made them. The villages of early America. The small towns and the big cities made them. They are the naturals, with none of the decay of Europe eating them. Wit is what they have and give. Wit and six or seven other things. Their art is a natural art, an art of naturalness. Its whole value is in its naturalness. It is a spontaneous art and it exerts the only influence on the people that matters. Any history that ignores or neglects these is a wretched and false history. Any writer who does not know about each of these does not know about his country. The record cannot be complete and ignore Popeye in the films. It is necessary to know what is going on in the country in every dimension. It is imperative to place Donald Duck in proper relation to the war between John L. Lewis of the C. I. O. and William Green of the A. F. of L.

The American legend has never before been so complex and healthy as it is now, in the year 1938. The hero football team, and the hero football player; the great left-fielder; the wisecracking ex-heavyweight champion; these are all simultaneously real, and must be remembered, since they are remembered by the people.

The time has come for scoffing to end. The time for the end of scoffing came long ago, but nobody bothered to notice it. Any people capable of producing these, as well as all the others required by the machine

## Americans

of history and brought into being by that machine, are too great a people to be patronized. To seek to hurry them, however, is absurd. They cannot be hurried by grammar school, high school, university, or any other mechanical device to educate. They cannot be educated artificially. They are growing naturally, and they are by far the greatest body of people in the world today. Their potentialities are the greatest too. Not to be able to see this is folly for the writer, the painter, the composer, the historian, and all the others dynamically individualistic. Not to be able to share with them their growth is death for the individual.

On the stage of the legitimate theatre is the actor, the great, the good, the bad, and the terrible. All are Americans, whether it's Joe Cook playing the zany or Raymond Massey playing Abe Lincoln in Illinois. Joe Frisco hoofing or Maxine Sullivan singing.

In the newspapers are the daily chroniclers; the columnists of all kinds that America has created: Westbrook Pegler, Walter Winchell, Louis Sobol, Leonard Lyons, and by all means Mrs. Roosevelt. There are the cartoonists and the comic-strip artists. (They are all over the place and are part of the drama, part of the unfolding American legend. *The New Yorker* has the pictures of Peter Arno, Whitney Darrow, Jr., William Hoff, Helen Hokinson, James Thurber, and the incredibly American George Price. *Harper's Bazaar* has the chatterers and Elsa Maxwell. And so on.)

Most democratic of all, though, is the abundance of what the radio has of the legend of the country: from high-toned music with American wisecracks from Deems Taylor to the popular-mechanics madness of Colonel Stoopnagle; from the opera, with its fantastic plot for the first time ribbed, to the Sunday Evening hour with that Ford man taking his stand in first-class American speech. And it's all free. It's that country.

The orchestras are amazing, burning with the cockeyed energy of the American race, the comedy, the crazy health, the awful unrest, the need to move physically, singing and swinging the goofy adolescent solo of the child jumping with growing pains. From Stephen Foster to Cole Porter, American music is a body equal to that of any other people, and is strictly not to be dismissed. That body of music may not be the work of a giant like Beethoven, or one like Bach, or one like Brahms, but it is a great body of music and belongs with all other great bodies of music, by giants or by peasants, by one man or by a continent full of men. Where the hell else has there ever been anything like what's now America? What other people would dare invent and enjoy the Bronx Cheer? What other people could

## Americans

invent the meaning and the vocabulary to say "Oh Yeah"? What other people would understand and love a Winchell? Where the hell else, for that matter, could a man *become* a Winchell and be as great a guy as he is? The orchestras, the music, the songs. It's all tangled up. It's all one.

**AND THE MOVIES:** all them stories, all them fables, all them beautiful women, all them amazing children: Shirley Temple, Mickey Rooney, Jane Withers, Jackie Searl, and the others. Even Europe in the movies is America. Even Charlie Chan is American. Even Mr. Moto is American. Even war in the movies is American, instead of neurotic. And the newsreels: the style of them, the energy and comedy of them: the imaginative-ness, the invention, and absurdity of them for the sake of comedy.

America made these entertainers, and now, very naturally, they are making America. The personality of the President is out of this America. You've heard him talk over the radio and you've seen him in the newsreels. He's natural. He knows how to laugh.

The pool-room wits and the street-corner comics.

Where the hell else could you have so much comedy among picketing strikers?

And how did it happen?

It happened naturally, by itself, because, as I've said, this is the region for naturalness; this is the terrain for it; this is the style of government for it; this is the race for it. It couldn't help but happen the way it did and it couldn't help be the way it is now.

Americans use the machine, instead of letting the machine use them. And I don't mean mechanics; I don't mean factories. I mean the machine that's coming down over the people of Europe and making them uniform and inhuman—not because they want to be uniform and inhuman, but because that region is the sad one, the heavy, the dull, the fearful, the neurotic, the unnatural, the abnormal. This country's got to stay the way it is, so they will know it's not impossible. They may never get out of it alive, but Americans from all over Europe got out of it alive long ago, and Americans born in Europe in the future should always have a home to look to and hope to reach someday.

That's all and I thank you.