

"AMATEUR" CRAZY

Out of the Thousands Who Have Sought Microphone Glory, Less Than 200 Have Been Given Professional Engagements—Here's a Frank "Confession" on How the Game Is Worked



Mabel Ralston, a Mississippi "hush" singer who made good



The gong! A laugh from the audience, a kindly word from Major Edward Bowes, and another radio amateur steps away from the microphone. The "victim" does not get a professional engagement, but he does get paid for "taking the rap"

By Carol Bird

IT IS "Amateur Hour" on the air. A voice, unctuous, exuding paternal interest, acts as entrepreneur master of ceremonies, interlocutor, judge.

"First on the list of amateurs you will hear tonight is a young baritone with a winning smile," the kindly, suave voice announces, and then, addressing the amateur, "and what is your name, young man?" "Rocco Salagnoci," replies a hesitant voice, with a somewhat broken accent. "What do you do, Rocco?" "I am a pants presser," replies Rocco. "And what does your father do?" "He is a street cleaner," replies Rocco. "So, a street cleaner?" repeats the unctuous voice. "Where does your father clean streets?" "In Podokus, Minnesota," replies Rocco, stammering slightly.

"Are you visiting in New York?" asks the daddy of this particular amateur hour. "Yeah, Cap'n," says Rocco. "I gotta sister here, and I'm gonna stay here for a while. All my life I love singing. Now I wanna sing in opera. Some one else can press my pants."

Roars from the invisible studio audience. Burst of applause. A hearty, natural-seeming laugh from the entrepreneur.

"What are you going to sing, Rocco?" "The Volga Boat Song," replies the amateur. "All right, go ahead!" The accompanist plays and Rocco raises his voice in soaring song.

IT IS but one of a number of "acts" put on by amateurs under the direction of entrepreneurs of various amateur hours on the radio. It reminds one somewhat of an old-time minstrel show. The "actors" have varied stunts. They sing. They tap-dance. They yodel. Whistle. Make sounds like gargling. Play cornets and jew's-harps and an assortment of Rube Goldberg type of complicated instrument. Thingamajigs made of cigar box, caps of whisky bottles, an old rubber band. Music (or noisemakers, according to how they hit your ear drums) concocted out of shoe-strings, brass buttons and empty spoons!

Under the guidance of the master of ceremonies of the amateur hour the performers confide that they are coloratura sopranos, deep-sea basses, dramatic tenors and in quavery voices, cocksure voices, husky, tremulous voices, affected voices, shrinking-violet, timorous voices, stuttering, stammering voices, glib voices they give their names, the nature of their work, their parents' status in life, their own future ambitions, the number of their children, and so on and on. They pour out their histories into the microphone, prompted and questioned by their "benefactors."

It is like a confessional. Stenographers, bootblacks, waitresses, long-shoremen, messenger boys, deep-sea divers, stock clerks, customers' men, grocery-store salesmen, cooks, dishwashers, porters, chambermaids, street-car conductors, poultrymen, night watchmen, colored, white, Chinese, Spanish, English, German, Japanese—they are all there, ostensibly wooing Lady Luck. Ready to answer all questions. To take a lot of joshing. To sing, dance, play the trombone, do their stuff in a quartet, accompany themselves on mando-

lins, banjos, violins. Sing operatic airs or just plain ballads.

Their voices range all the way from very sour to pretty fair. They get applause, some "kidding," telephone votes, medals, laughs, compliments and sometimes the gong. Occasionally—but only very occasionally, as you will discover—they get an engagement as a result of their efforts and because of their talent. This, briefly, is the air picture of the amateur hour.

But what is the whole thing behind the scenes?

What actually happens from the moment that a little tylist out in Dubuque, Ia., gets bitten by the bug to be an opera star to the time that she struts her stuff via the ether on an amateur hour? Is the smooth-running amateur hour show rehearsed? Is all that pat dialogue spontaneous? What do little Jennie Schmalhaus and Billy Minisberg do to get a spot on the program? Do they know in advance whether or not they are going to get the gong? Do they care? Are they paid? How many get real, honest-to-goodness vaudeville engagements? How many go broke waiting? How much do they earn if, and when, they are eventually booked, and how long are their engagements?

These amateur hours which are now featured on the radio programs at specified times each week are mixtures of hope, despair, ambition, tragedy, fulfillment, frustration and disappointment for many a youth from the whistle stops in the hinterland who are filled with glamorous dreams of future fame, inspired by what they hear over the air on these "hours" which hold forth so much golden promise to them.

There was a time, not so long ago, when relief organizations were swamped by stranded boys and girls who had hitch-hiked to New York City for their "big chance" on an amateur hour. Most of them had no funds whatsoever; some possessed only a few dollars. Most of the young men and women were in their early twenties, some 16 and 17 years of age. These stranded amateurs, yearning for a place on an amateur hour, encouraged by letters offering them auditions, became such a problem that the heads of relief organizations got in touch with those responsible for the amateur hour, and the nuisance—and the tragedies—eventually ceased as a result.

"We had, a few months ago, more

than 300 stranded amateur hour aspirants every week, applying to us for aid," said a spokesman for the Emergency Relief Bureau of New York City. "They came from all parts of the United States and very few of them had any money at all. They were lured here by the belief that they would receive prompt engagements in vaudeville and elsewhere, and they became stranded when they learned that their dreams were only that."

"The trouble was that the people responsible for these radio amateur hours often sent out letters to these young people which were ambiguous in construction and too encouraging. They promised them auditions, but to the optimistic and ambitious boys and girls who received these epistles that meant nothing short of an engagement."



Fred Allen, left, and Ray Perkins, right, have a lot of fun on their amateur hours. Allen offers professional engagements as prizes for the winners on his program



They may look like they came from Oklahoma, but as a matter of fact they are a group of Passaic, N. J., boys who "got a break" through an amateur-hour performance

"It is up to those who send out letters of this kind, granting auditions, to make it very clear just what an audition is, so the meaning will not be misinterpreted, and so that the recipients of these letters will know an 'audition' is one thing, a real, paying vaudeville engagement quite another, and that it is often a far cry between the two. The wording of these letters must not be too encouraging."

"Some of the hopeful amateurs, fired to dreams of fame, either by one appearance on an amateur hour or by the promise of a chance to appear on one, arrived here broke and in need of immediate work and funds. They traveled

from one vaudeville agency, one booking agent's office to another, spending weary days in this routine, only to find no openings for untrained talent. They discovered that so many professionals were out of work that there was slim chance for them to get bookings. We are grateful that the plague of amateur hour traveling talent has about ceased. It was getting pretty thick for a while."

That is one side of the picture. Now for the other.

WHAT about all those marvelous engagements that the lucky Irish girl nurse got after singing "Mother Machree"? And how about that booking that Tony Amatto, the Italian boot-black, annexed after playing a medley of all the instruments in an orchestra? How about all those marvelous "breaks" for the "talented amateurs" which the masters of ceremony, the "benefactors" of amateur talent, boast about, for which the sponsors of the programs are thanked so heartily and so often over the air, about which the broadcasting companies announcers go into enthusiastic hyperbole?

The sponsors of the amateur hours are pictured to the air audience as veritable Santa Clauses, great philanthropists, wonderful backers of amateur talent, patrons of the arts, so to speak. Everybody gives them a hand and thinks kindly of their good works.

But what about the amateur? Somehow, after his initial appearance on the amateur hour, he gets lost in the shuffle. He is generally forgotten, it seems, except in the rare cases where he gets an engagement and a few weeks' salary. Every one remembers the kindly "General" So and So who handles the amateur hour, the pater-

nal "Captain" or "Colonel" or "Major," and the laxative pillmakers, the tooth-paste manufacturers, the coffee brewer, but—how about the amateur?

Let us visit the headquarters of Major Edward Bowes, who claims to be the originator of the amateur hour and who introduces a program of amateur talent every week on one of the big networks. He has a suite of offices on several floors of a Broadway office building in New York. It is filled with stenographers, typists, filing clerks, publicity writers, switchboard operators messenger boys and girls.

From an office assistant you learn the procedure, the way an amateur takes to get on the air. On each "Amateur Hour" night announcement is made that any amateur who wants to find his place in the sun should write a letter giving his name and address, what he can play, sing or what not and all other details. The applicant "must live in New York or vicinity," the announcer says, making this point, perhaps, as a result of the Emergency Relief Bureau prodding.

However, it goes without saying that many an amateur listening in from Squeedorp, Tenn., will soon leave his mountain fastness and pile helter-skelter on his way New Yorkward.

MAJOR BOWES receives an average of about 1500 applications for auditions a week. Out of that number he hears about 600. A studio at the National Broadcasting Company is used for this purpose. The major attends these auditions in person and selects those amateurs which he wants to appear on his programs.

Out of these thousands of applications and hundreds of amateurs who have appeared on the Bowes Amateur Hour, 145 individual amateurs have received engagements. Ten units are now out on the road, playing vaudeville engagements, appearing at automobile shows and other entertainments, and you can figure out for yourself whether ambitious, optimistic amateurs should or should not get so steamed up over "Amateur Hour" opportunities. Almost one year has elapsed since the Amateur Hour first became an air feature, and in that time less than 150 amateurs have succeeded in securing paying engagements.

Those who have been booked are often booked for only brief engagements, though it was said at Major Bowes' office that the first unit of amateurs—and these units are made up of ten or twelve amateurs each—have been out since July.

Salaries? The office assistant couldn't be certain, but thought they were about \$60 a week and up. Transportation is paid, but the amateur performers must handle their own hotel and food bills.

And how about the amateurs who merely manage to strut their stuff once on the amateur hour program? Is all that glib patter rehearsed? Is it extemporaneous and, if so, how timed to fit in so neatly with the hour limitation set? What does the amateur get for his work, the strain, his humiliation if he gets the gong? The famous Bowes gong, incidentally, has been gold-plated, and perhaps that helps the unlucky amateurs to "take it on the chin" a bit more graciously. Besides, an amateur hour wouldn't be an amateur hour without a gong. Each amateur gets paid \$10 by Major Bowes for his evening's appearance on the air.

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