

2009

Book Review: "Something on my own: Gertrude Berg and American broadcasting, 1929-1956"

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Recommended Citation

Stark, C. A. (2009). Book Review: "Something on my own: Gertrude Berg and American broadcasting, 1929-1956" (1st ed., vol. 16, pp. 119-121). Philadelphia, PA: Journal of Radio & Audio Media.

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Glenn D. Smith's book *Something on My Own: Gertrude Berg and American Broadcasting, 1929-1956* takes an historical look at Gertrude Berg, one of the most prominent, yet seemingly forgotten figures of the early days of American broadcasting. Prominent scholars of broadcasting history will have heard of Berg, but for the rest of us Smith chronicles her life and career in a rich, informative, and entertaining manner.

Berg's fascinating entertainment career began when she was a girl, acting for guests at her father's hotel in the Catskills during the summer. Partly in rebellion to her parents and partly wishing to debunk many stereotypical portrayals of Jews that she saw in the entertainment industry, Berg was determined to produce and develop a program that presented Jewish Americans in a positive, family-friendly light. What she came up with was *The Goldbergs* (originally titled *The Rise of the Goldbergs*), which ran from 1929 to 1944, splitting time between the NBC and CBS radio networks. *The Goldbergs* detailed the trials of a Jewish American family "just trying to get along" during the Great Depression. Berg's character, "Molly", was the matriarch of the family who offered words of wisdom and advice to her two children ("Rosalie" and "Sammy") and her husband "Jake" played by James Waters, who would later be replaced by Philip Loeb.

The program professed to offer no solutions to the day's problems, but it appealed to many listening families who were also just trying to get by. Regardless of their religious affiliation or ethnic heritage, many listeners quickly flocked to the program and made it one of the most popular in radio history. The program's immense popularity became evident just three weeks after its debut when station WJZ received 110,000 listener complaints after Berg could not perform due to a sore throat.

When the program was cancelled in 1944, Berg worked tirelessly to develop a television version of *The Goldbergs*. She faced many obstacles finding support for a television version of the program however, and found work both on stage and in minor supporting roles on television. During this time, she continued to write TV scripts for the program and pitched the show to the networks. In 1947 and 1948, during stage productions of *The Goldbergs*, Berg began working with Philip Loeb, the man who would assume the role of “Jake” both on-stage and eventually on-screen. Without spoiling too much of Smith’s story, the televised version of *The Goldbergs* debuted on CBS in 1949 after some very daring and masterful negotiations between Berg and network and advertising executives. Major success soon followed the debut of the television program. In 1950, a theatrical version of *The Goldbergs* was produced for Paramount Pictures, and in 1951 Berg received the first Emmy award for Best Actress.

If there is one thing Smith’s book is guilty of, it seems he spends a lot of time on various tangents, and Philip Loeb’s story is a prime example. Loeb’s story itself makes for a fascinating read, and while Smith devotes considerable tome to it, he does Loeb’s story justice by providing extensive information on his career while detailing his battles with SISC and HUAC beginning in 1952. Where Smith’s work stands out however, is with his ability to tie these tangential stories into Berg’s story. While Loeb’s dealings with the United States government and the entertainment industry are heart wrenching to read, Smith does the right thing and discusses how they affected Berg and the production of her show. Berg and Loeb were great friends and Berg stuck up for Loeb at her own peril. While Loeb took the brunt of the punishment handed out by the government and the industry (the end result cost him his life), Berg was placed between a rock and a hard

place – should she risk her career to protect a true friend who helped her reach her high position in the first place?

The Goldbergs lost momentum during the early 1950s and the program's contract with CBS was not renewed. In 1954 Berg signed a contract with the DuMont network but by then it was too late. Not only had the program run out of steam but by this time television production and programming tastes were changing; live production was on the decline and audiences did not seem as interested in the type of stories *The Goldbergs* offered. Additionally, losing the popular Philip Loeb hobbled the program until it was finally canceled by DuMont in 1956.

After the program was cancelled, Berg found steady work and success on the theater circuit (most notably as Mrs. Jacoby in *A Majority of One*) and on television with the program *Mrs. G Goes to College* in 1961. In 1963 Berg was diagnosed with acute bacterial endocarditis after collapsing backstage during a performance; she passed away in 1966.

Smith tells Berg's story with an enthusiastic zeal while writing in a clear, understandable manner. The reader can tell he truly enjoyed working on the project, and that he was very interested in telling Berg's story. This book is probably too topic-specific for general broadcasting history courses, but it could be used at the graduate level. Scholars focusing on women's issues or Jewish-American issues in the early days of broadcasting would also benefit from reading this book.

Overall there are two reasons why Smith's work is an excellent text to consider. First, it tells an important story of one of the less commonly known historical figures of American broadcasting. Gertrude Berg was the first woman to negotiate a contract for a

network radio program, as well as the first woman to write the scripts for the program and act in it. She took charge of casting for *The Goldbergs*; she worked on renewal contracts with network executives and hammered out sponsorship deals with advertising executives – and she did it all on her own. Along the way she forged friendships and working relationships with more historically well-known figures of American broadcasting. This is an important story that should be told, and the history of radio and television broadcasting in America is incomplete without it.

Second, Smith's recounting of Berg's story provides an excellent example of historical research that proves no one operates in a vacuum. In addition to the fascinating story of Gertrude Berg, the reader is also exposed to equally compelling and lesser-known stories of Philip Loeb, Jean Muir, and Milton Berle to name a few. As mentioned earlier, the length of some of these side stories may put off some readers, but broadcasting historians will appreciate the work Smith has done.

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