



Race, Culture & Amos 'n' Andy

by Dominick Cancilla





If you've heard anything about the old *Amos 'n' Andy* show, by almost any measurement the most popular radio show of all time, you've probably heard that it was incredibly racist. There's a reason for that. The show's storylines revolved around the adventures of a pair of black men who had moved to Chicago from the southern United States. These characters, and many others in the series, spoke in black dialect. And most importantly, the show was written and performed by Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll — a pair of white men.

For most people, this is enough. Even many historians don't bother to listen to those shows which have managed to survive, and almost none bother to read the original scripts, because they feel they already know all that they need to know. And for this reason, they're missing most of the story.

The fact of the matter is, *Amos 'n' Andy* was never intended to be racist, and even in the 21st century not a day passes without our feeling its influence.

The modern-day view of their creation was summed up as early as 1972 by author William Manchester, who dismissed the program as "a nightly racial slur," and used its Depression-era popularity to illustrate the casual racism which pervaded that time. Since then, a popular view of *Amos 'n' Andy* has grown up in which the very title has become a synonym for the excesses of crude and vicious racial stereotyping, an embarrassment to observers looking back from our more progressive age — or, especially among academics, a talking point in the eternal debate over the politics of racial identity. Preconceived notions of the program's content lead, inevitably, to the sort of presumptuous academic laziness which has characterized much of the scholarly treatment of *Amos 'n' Andy* since the 1960s.

— Old-time radio expert
Elizabeth McLeod

Freeman Fisher Gosden was born in 1899 in Richmond, Virginia, the proud son of a Confederate Army soldier. His childhood home stood between Richmond's black and white communities — the same neighborhood where the first black public school in the U.S. was opened. Richmond's black community was unusual for the time, emphasizing self-sufficiency and entrepreneurship despite Virginia's strict segregation laws. Gosden's best friend was a black orphan named Garrett Brown who lived with his family for a decade. Gosden's father was a strict man who made sure that both boys had a good education and strong religious training, even though segregation prevented Freeman and Garrett from attending the same schools and churches.

Gosden's upbringing made him very familiar with "black English," and that familiarity served him in later years when he dictated *Amos 'n' Andy* scripts to Correll. Malaprops and other linguistic jokes aside, the dialect speech in *Amos 'n' Andy* was actually much closer to dialect spoken by

actual people than was the off-the-top-of-some-white-guy's-head dialect used in most minstrel shows of the time.

Charles James Correll was the son of a brickmaker and grandson of an Irish immigrant. He was born in 1890 in Peoria, Illinois. He showed a flare for acting at a young age, appearing in his first play at the age of seven. His love for vaudeville led to a teenage job as a theater usher and, eventually, to a job as a talent coach, touring the country helping Elks, Shriners, Masons, and other fraternal organizations put on neighborhood minstrel shows. It was as a talent coach that Correll was first teamed with Gosden.

It's difficult for a modern reader to understand the wide popularity and acceptance of the minstrel show in the United States. In a minstrel show, white men blackened their faces with burnt cork, drew white circles around their mouths, and put on shows so stylized and standardized that seeing one must have been very much like seeing another. By the turn of the 20th century, the minstrel show had become so much a part of American culture that its attributes served as a shorthand for certain types of performance. Two facets of the minstrel show in particular — the humorous "black" dialect act and the singer in blackface — were instantly recognizable.

After a few years helping others put on minstrel shows, Gosden and Correll began a career as a singing duo. There were quite a few teams trying to break into the emerging field of Radio, and Gosden and Correll were so interested in the new medium (because they thought it would lead to more stage work) that for a time they made nightly radio appearances for no pay other than a cheap dinner.

The first inkling that Gosden and Correll were intended for bigger things came when they performed a song called "The Kinky Kids Parade" which told the story of a group of black children putting on a parade in their back yard. During the performance of the song, the pair did a little bit of dialect patter, and that patter brought them instant attention. The song was heavily requested, and over repeat performances, the patter was lengthened and new characters were added. The realization that the two of them could play any number of characters — something they could never do on stage — was a revelation.

As Gosden and Correll's talent with voices became widely known, they were asked by the *Chicago Tribune* to do a radio

version of the popular comic strip *The Gumps* — something which had never been done before. The men were interested, but for a variety of reasons preferred to use their own material rather than interpret the Gump strips.

After considering a number of options for a new radio show, Gosden and Correll decided to perform as "blackface" characters, in part because they found it easier to pretend to be other people behind a "mask" of dialect which replaced minstrel show burnt cork. By using these conventions, they could distance themselves from their audience and lose themselves in their roles.

At this point it is important to remember that although minstrel show singers performed in blackface, the time that they pretended to actually be black was long past. As repulsive as the practice would be to a modern audience, blackface for singers was an accepted tradition. For example, Al Jolson — one of the most popular entertainers of the 20th century — also felt more at ease in front of an audience while masked in burnt cork. When Jolson performed "April Showers," "California, Here I Come," or "Are You Lonesome Tonight?" (later recorded by Elvis), or sang "The Cantor" (which is entirely in Yiddish), nobody thought he was pretending to be black.

Gosden and Correll also preferred to perform in dialect for another reason — they worried that, if the show failed, it would harm their singing careers. In fact they were so worried about this that for the first few months the show was in production, they insisted on performing anonymously and broadcast from a private room at a Chicago hotel so that even the employees of the radio station they worked for didn't know who they were.

The show Gosden and Correll created was *Sam 'n' Henry*; it was on the air for 15 minutes every night on a local Chicago radio station, and featured a story which continued from episode to episode, years before the first soap opera. Gosden and Correll wrote every episode and played all the parts.

The characters of Sam and Henry had almost nothing to do with minstrel-show blackface routines. The broad jokes and repartee that was part of such shows was completely missing, replaced by an engaging storyline and characters who were interesting enough that the audience truly cared about what happened to them.

Gosden and Correll earned \$100 a week for the show, but as its popularity increased,

they were soon making up to \$2,000 a week for personal appearances.

It soon became apparent that the duo was being underpaid for their broadcasts, so they proposed a scheme by which they would record their *Sam 'n' Henry* shows and sell them to other radio stations around the country. In coming up with this scheme, Gosden and Correll had invented syndication, an institution which would eventually be at the core of both television and radio, but the station which broadcast their show would have none of it. As soon as their contract was up, Gosden and Correll left *Sam 'n' Henry* to seek greener pastures.

On March 19, 1928, a new series — *Amos 'n' Andy* — appeared on station WMAQ in Chicago. Through Gosden and Correll's "chainless chain" of affiliates, the show also premiered on 28 affiliate stations around the country. Gosden and Correll continued to write and act in the show themselves. Because the two men played all the parts for the show's first seven years, female characters were almost never voiced (women were depicted through conversations between men, letters, one-sided telephone calls, etc.) The shows were done without rehearsal, and because there was no facility for editing at the time, if Gosden and Correll made a mistake while recording a disk for their affiliates, they had to start the show over from the beginning with a new recording disk.

The new show depicted the adventures of Amos Jones and Andrew H. Brown, a pair of black men who had moved to the big city of Chicago from the southern United States. Although Amos and Andy themselves were fish out of water, the show also featured middle-class black characters who were educated and intelligent as a regular part of the storyline.

The characters in *Amos 'n' Andy* weren't realistically black. But were they intended as insulting or condescending to black people? This is a more difficult — and more important — question.

Some people assume that the *Amos 'n' Andy* characters who don't speak in dialect and show obvious intelligence or education are intended to be white, but this is obviously not the case. For example, one character, Ruby Taylor, spoke standard English, but the fact that she was black can be inferred from her having a romantic relationship with Amos. It's reasonably safe to say that an interracial relationship on the radio would have been more "problematic"

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in the thirties than an educated black woman. So obviously Gosden and Correll didn't think that all black people spoke in dialect. It is interesting to note that over the course of the show, as Amos worked his way up the social ladder and became more firmly a member of the middle class, his dialect became less and less pronounced.

Because the characters in *Amos 'n' Andy* had real depth and range of emotion and motivation — they had to be well rounded to keep an audience's interest for five or six nights a week — they stand out as the least stereotypical of any of their contemporaries and imitators. For far too long *Amos 'n' Andy* was almost the only prominent presentation of black characters on radio who were not outright stereotypes, servants, or parodies of white society. And because there were essentially no white characters, white listeners had no choice but to identify with one of the black characters while listening.

Largely because they needed to avoid controversy, Gosden and Correll essentially never depicted racism on their show. Two examples (cited by Elizabeth McLeod) of *Amos 'n' Andy* approaching this issue are an episode in 1931 in which Amos complains about the way he is sometimes treated when he goes into a shop to buy clothes (although the race of the rude clerks in question is not mentioned), and part of another series that same year in which Amos is questioned by white police officers in a brutal manner over the course of several days. This latter scene was a little too realistic for some, and elicited a complaint from the National Association of Chiefs of Police.

In his book *Radio and TV Premiums*, Jim Harmon quotes Gosden as saying, “[*Amos 'n' Andy*] was the most sympathetic presentation Charles Correll and I could get on the air. If it were any more favorable to black people, we would just have been

forced off the air.”

Unfortunately, advertising and magazine illustrations of the time often depicted stereotypes rather than what was portrayed in the actual radio shows, and early in their career Gosden and Correll had a publicity photo taken of themselves in minstrel makeup (as opposed to more “realistic” blackface) which saw wide circulation even after they gave up the practice. Since some of these items are to this day more widely seen than the original broadcasts are listened to, they certainly contribute to the misunderstanding of the series.

By 1929, when NBC picked up the show with Pepsodent as a sponsor, *Amos 'n' Andy* was running on more radio stations than any NBC show. Pepsodent suggested turning *Amos 'n' Andy* into a high-quality minstrel show, with a full orchestra and Gosden and Correll in more traditional roles. Gosden and Correll refused and, in the end, won out. After going to Harlem to do research, Gosden and Correll moved *Amos 'n' Andy* from Chicago to New York in August of 1929.

An early indication of the show's increasing popularity was an enormous outpouring of letters and petitions when the show's time slot was moved from 11 o'clock to 7 o'clock, east-coast time — making it too early for West-coast listeners. Because of this, it was decided that the show would be broadcast twice nightly, once for Central and Eastern stations, and once for the remainder of the country. In later years, many popular radio shows would follow this pattern — which is all the more impressive when you remember that a great many radio shows were broadcast live, necessitating a second performance by the same cast shortly after the first.

Amos 'n' Andy reached the peak of its popularity in 1930. *The New Yorker* and *Time* reported that many cinemas would

Amos 'n' Andy:

Selected Shorts

“There are three things I'll never forget about America — the Rocky Mountains, Niagara Falls, and *Amos 'n' Andy*.” — George Bernard Shaw

There were 586 episodes of *Sam 'n' Henry*, 4,091 15-minute *Amos 'n' Andy* episodes, 426 half-hour *Amos 'n' Andy* episodes, and 78 episodes on television.

After two years and 586 episodes of *Sam 'n' Henry*, 4,091 episodes of *Amos 'n' Andy* were produced between March 1928 and February 1943, running five or six times a week. 426 half-hour episodes of *The Amos 'n' Andy Show* were produced from October 1943 through May 1955. *The Amos 'n' Andy Music Hall* — a show which interspersed records with skits — ran from September 1954 through November 1960.

At its peak, *Amos 'n' Andy* had 40 million listeners — approximately one third of all Americans.

Of the thousands of episodes of *Amos 'n' Andy* produced over 34 years, just over 230 are known to have survived.

For its first seven years, the only voices heard on *Amos 'n' Andy* were those of Gosden and Correll. They played as many as ten different characters in a single scene.

In 1931, Gosden and Correll were earning a quarter of a million dollars a year from the show. In 1948, they sold it to CBS for \$2.5 million.

Major sponsors of *Amos 'n' Andy* over the years included Pepsodent, Campbell's soup, Rinso detergent, and Rexall drugstores.

The phrases “I'se regusted,” “holy mackerel,” and “check and double check” became national catch phrases because of *Amos 'n' Andy*.

Bad enough that *Amos 'n' Andy* were played by white men, the character of Beulah, the black maid on the *Fibber McGee and Molly* show, was also played by a white man.

stop their show and pipe *Amos 'n' Andy* into the theater so that patrons wouldn't stay home to listen to the radio. It is said that few crimes were committed and water usage plummeted during the time *Amos 'n' Andy* was on the air. People spoke of being able to walk down the street on a hot summer's night and not miss a word of the show because every window was open and every radio was tuned to *Amos 'n' Andy*.

Heavy merchandising followed. A candy bar (ironically a vanilla wafer covered in chocolate), mechanical toys, stationery, greeting cards (from a company later to be known as Hallmark), and all manner of other licensed items appeared on the market. A wind-up *Amos 'n' Andy* Taxi in very good condition can sometimes be seen going for more than \$600 on eBay. From the show and other sources, Gosden and Correll were now making a combined \$11,000 a week.

During this time, Gosden and Correll also made *Check and Double Check* — an *Amos 'n' Andy* feature film, with themselves in black face as the lead characters. The film wasn't written by Gosden and Correll, it's really bad, and should probably be avoided at all costs. Even so, it was RKO's biggest hit of 1930, leading the studio to offer Gosden and Correll a multi-picture deal. The duo refused, likely because neither of them particularly liked the film.

The country's leading black newspaper, the *Chicago Defender*, praised Gosden and Correll as far back as 1928, and many other black newspapers had good things to say about *Amos 'n' Andy* through 1930. However, also in 1930, the *Pittsburgh Courier* mounted a campaign to get *Amos 'n' Andy* off the air, saying that it promoted stereotypes of the black community. For example, it pointed out that the series featured a crooked black lawyer, and said that this sent the message that all black lawyers were crooked. The paper ignored the fact that the show also depicted a number of honest, skillful black lawyers. Fortunately, the *Courier* was largely alone amongst black newspapers in its quest — not even the NAACP officially endorsed its position — and eventually dropped the subject entirely. In the midst of this protest, the *Chicago Defender* invited Gosden and Correll to host its annual picnic and appear with Duke Ellington and Lucky Millender, drawing an audience of 35,000 black Chicagoans.

Some commentators — both contemporary and in later years — criticized the show because it drew humor from blacks trying to fit into white society, when in reality *Amos 'n' Andy's* early humor was based on a pair of black southerners trying to become part of a more middle-class black community, and in any case this type of humor dwindled over the years as *Amos* and *Andy* became used to their surroundings.

Other commentators complained that having black people speaking non-standard English sent the message that black people had their own culture because they were not able to assimilate into white culture. Ironically, in the era of multiculturalism, we no longer consider assimilation the virtue it once was. And both of these arguments overlook the fact that the separation between white and black in *Amos 'n' Andy* was never particularly strong. (In the Christmas episode that was a tradition from 1940 to 1954, *Andy* gets a job as a department-store Santa and the race issue isn't mentioned — nobody even blinks an eye.)

Less than eight percent of African American families owned a radio in 1930, and there is no consensus over how the show was received by the average black listener. A *Radio Digest* article in August 1930 interviewed a variety of black radio listeners, asking them what they thought of *Amos 'n' Andy*, and found a wide variety of opinions. Two examples:

"Like everyone else in Harlem, I listen to Amos 'n' Andy every night. Those white boys know how to play Negro parts better than any black-face comedians I have ever heard. For one thing, they do not belittle the Negro and I think their programs have done more to help the white people understand us than all the books ever written." — Rooming house owner, 134th Street, Harlem

"Amos and Andy do not appeal to me. If they were Negroes it would be the same. If I were white it would make no difference." — Rev. W. O. Carrington, Methodist minister, 2084 Main Street, Hartford

Over the course of their career, Gosden and Correll made many public appearances (some for black charities) and stage performances which were heavily attended by black audiences. In a 1929 *Radio Digest*

article (also quoted by McLeod), Gosden relates, "We put on our our *Amos 'n' Andy* vaudeville act out there at the Regal, which is really a palatial theatre patronized almost exclusively by colored people. When we appeared on the stage we received such an ovation from the packed house we didn't know what to do. They not only enjoyed our skit but seemed to get a great kick out of our trick lights where we are transformed from black to white at the turn of a switch."

Because nightly shows were declining in popularity due to the pressures of World War II, and because sponsor Campbell's Soup found its sales reduced because of a shortage of metal for cans, *Amos 'n' Andy* left the air for seven months before reappearing on NBC in a 30-minute format. The half-hour *Amos 'n' Andy Show* was written by professional writers, had a larger cast — including African-American performers James Baskett, Ruby Dandridge, Eddie Green, Jester Hairston, Johnny Lee, Lillian Randolph, and Ernest Whitman — and was a series of self-contained sitcoms, often with "twist" endings, as opposed to the 15-minute shows' continuity. Because they were now performed in front of a live audience, there was a new emphasis on

At the height of *Amos 'n' Andy's* popularity, some movie houses piped the show into their theaters so that they would not lose business. This became illegal after a lawsuit brought by NBC, but many theaters quietly continued the practice.



laugh-out-loud humor which had largely been absent in the show's earlier incarnation. This new emphasis led to the phasing out of many of the show's more normal characters and the introduction of more running characters who were goofy in one way or another. Because he was more of a laugh-getter than Amos, the character of lodge-hall president Kingfish was much more prominent in these shows, many of which dealt with his attempts to put some scheme over on Andy (who was now a bit more gullible than he had been in the show's previous incarnation). The character of Amos was generally only seen briefly, often at the end of the show when he would show up to straighten Andy out. As time went on, more white characters and guest stars appeared on the show.

It was during this half-hour show that Ernestine Wade became the first African-American regular on the series when she began playing Andy's girlfriend Valada Green in 1939. Barbara Jean Wong, a Chinese-American actress joined the cast in 1940 to portray Amos's daughter Arbadella. But through 1943, all of the male roles (aside from the announcer) were voiced by Gosden and Correll.

When CBS brought the show to television in 1951, it almost completely erased

the humanity which had made the original *Amos 'n' Andy* such a success. The TV characters were comic vehicles instead of rounded individuals. Gosden and Correll fought over the handling of the TV show from the start, and when their complaints to the president of CBS were ignored, they washed their hands of the entire business. NAACP protests in 1951 increased pressure on the show, and it was finally cancelled in 1953, although it continued in reruns until 1966. Interestingly, these protests seemed to have no effect on the radio version of the show. It was the decline of radio, not any official protest, which spelled doom for *Amos 'n' Andy*.

When the half-hour radio show went off the air in 1955, all that remained of Amos and Andy was *The Amos 'n' Andy Music Hall* on which the characters performed skits and spun records. The show faded from the airways in 1960.

Despite the fact that *Amos 'n' Andy* was quite progressive for its time, history has not been kind to it. Far too many people either rely on their memories (or worse, what they have heard) about the show when writing about it, or they listen to it and criticize it for its shortcomings as if it were being broadcast today. For example, Eliza-

beth McLeod quotes communications historian Erik Barnouw writing in 1966, "*In retrospect it is easy — at the time it was less easy — to see the stories and Amos 'n' Andy as part of the ghetto system. All of it was more readily accepted and maintained if one could hold onto this: 'they' were lovely people, essentially happy people, ignorant and somewhat shiftless and lazy in a lovable quaint way, not fitting in with higher levels of enterprise, better off where they were, essentially happy, happy... It could make South Side poverty somehow charming and fitting. The nation needed the fantasy.*" This description of the show is so far from reality that it's enough to make one wonder if Barnouw was truly familiar with *Amos 'n' Andy* at all.

Gosden — part of a team that created the first soap opera, the first sitcom, and the concept of syndication, and that brought a wider variety of black characters to the airwaves than any other show for decades — was so stung by the perception of racism that overtook the show after it was off the air that he retired and gave no significant interviews after his last appearance on the air as Amos. He had few public comments even when his long-time partner passed away in 1972. Freeman Gosden died in 1982. ~



AMOS 'N' ANDY 'N' ELIZABETH

In many Old Time Radio circles, Elizabeth McLeod is recognized as one of most knowledgeable modern OTR researchers. Her name appears frequently in a popular OTR listserve, and she displays broad, detailed knowledge of a variety of subjects in the field, both general and technical.

McLeod has a particular interest in *Amos 'n' Andy* and its impact on American entertainment. She has read more original documents and done deeper investigation into the show than anyone else we could locate. Since the article on *Amos 'n' Andy* earlier in this issue relied so heavily on McLeod's research, we thought it only fair that we allow her to address a few questions on the subject directly.

The Spook: *Would you please tell us a little bit about yourself and your background?*

Elizabeth McLeod: I'm 38 years old, live in New England, and worked for fifteen years in modern-day radio as a newswriter and news editor before becoming a freelance writer four years ago. I've been interested in radio and Depression-era history since I was a teenager.

TS: *How did you become interested in the Amos 'n' Andy radio program?*

EM: My grandparents were of the Depression generation, and spending as much time with them as I did as a child gave me a strong interest in that period. You can't read much about the Depression years in the US without running across references to *Amos 'n' Andy*, and these sparked my interest in learning more about the program. I had heard recordings of some of the 1940s-vintage episodes — but these clearly weren't the same series that had been such a powerful attraction in the early 1930s. I began searching for recordings of the original series, only to find that almost none were

known to exist. One thing led to another, and I eventually discovered that the scripts did survive. Eventually, I was able to obtain thru the Library of Congress my own copies of the scripts for the program's first ten years — nine reels of microfilm containing over 2,700 episodes — and these have been the foundation of my research ever since.

TS: *How would you describe Amos 'n' Andy to a modern audience?*

EM: In brief, it was a radio show about two working-class black men, Amos Jones and Andrew H. Brown, and their interactions with their friends. What makes the show so controversial is that these two black men — and many other characters in the original series — were created and portrayed by two white men, Freeman F. Gosden and Charles J. Correll.

Over its long run there were three distinct, very different versions of the program:

1. The original show, a fifteen-minute nightly dramatic-comedy serial dealing with the ups and downs of everyday life. This version ran the longest, from 1928 to 1943, and is most historically-important. This is the version on which my research has been focused. For the most part, the humor in this version was far more subtle, growing out of deep characterization rather than jokes, gags, or stereotypes — and dramatic plotting was even more important than the comic elements. The program had much more in common with the serialized dramatic comic strips of the 1920s and 1930s (especially "The Gumps") than it does with the self-contained sitcoms of today, although a show like "Frasier," in which the relationships of the characters evolve in long "story arcs" can trace its formative roots directly back to Correll and Gosden.

2. A half-hour weekly situation comedy,

airing on radio from 1943 to 1955. This was a very different version of the program, with more emphasis on jokes and word-play. The characters were drawn in much broader strokes than the original — essentially simplified, stripped-down versions of the characters from the serial. In this series, Amos's role was gradually reduced, and the stories focused increasingly on Andy's dealings with the small-time hustler George "Kingfish" Stevens.

3. A half-hour weekly situation comedy TV series, airing in first-run from 1951–53, and in reruns from 1954–66. This may be the version most familiar to people today — and is certainly a showcase for its all-black cast, drawn largely from the ranks of the African-American stage — but in its broad, slapstick approach it is also the version that is least representative of the original program.

TS: *In terms of popularity, what modern television show is most like Amos 'n' Andy?*

EM: Imagine the furor that surrounded the finale of "Seinfeld," or the outcome of the first "Survivor." Then imagine that sense of shared national excitement six nights a week, for nearly two years running. That's what it was like from 1929–31, when *Amos 'n' Andy* was at the peak of its popularity. The nightly audience ranged from 30 to 50 million people depending on which estimate you choose to believe — around one-third of the US population at that time.

TS: *What was Amos 'n' Andy's impact on radio? On comedy?*

EM: I don't think it's an overstatement to say that the original *Amos 'n' Andy* was the single most influential program in the history of American broadcasting. Correll and Gosden were the first American radio performers to present continuing characters in a continuing dramatized story — and their success paved the way for every such series to follow.

Before Correll and Gosden, radio was music, vaudeville skits, song-and-patter teams, and other such material with no dependence on context. But Correll and Gosden singlehandedly changed all that — they proved that listeners could and would follow a continuing story, tuning in night after night, week after week to follow characters who grew and developed from episode to episode. What happened to Amos and Andy on Monday had a direct impact on what happened to them Tuesday — and that, in turn, would play out on Wednesday. And so on and on and on. It's impossible to overstate what an impact this

had on the evolution of radio.

Correll and Gosden singlehandedly pulled radio out of the “novelty” realm and turned it into a form of mass entertainment, and that form of entertainment, in turn, set the pace for television. When you sit down tonight to watch the continuing stories of your favorite TV characters — you’re seeing the legacy of Correll and Gosden. The entire soap opera industry is following a trail blazed by Correll and Gosden. When a television program becomes a shared national experience — that too is the legacy of Correll and Gosden.

Correll and Gosden were also the first performers to really understand and exploit the capabilities of radio as a dramatic medium. They turned its greatest limitation — lack of a visual element — into its greatest strength. Listening to them, you didn’t picture two men sitting at a table in a little room in Chicago. You visualized an entire neighborhood of people — by the end of the show’s first five years, they had populated their world with over 150 different characters — some brought to life by voice characterizations, others simply by their being spoken about, and all of them different, distinctive people living all sorts of different lives: rich, poor, middle-class, men, women and children. They involved these characters in intricately-plotted stories that went on for weeks at a time — their longest sustained storyline ran for over seven months, and the most important character arc of the series — Amos’s courtship of Ruby Taylor — ran for more than seven years.

This continuing-story format gave them room to work in terms of very subtle characterization, and many radio critics in the 1930s commented on the steady flow of the program having captured “the true beat of life.” Having read the scripts, I fully agree with that judgement. At its best, from 1930–1935, there was simply nothing else on the air quite as engrossing as “Amos ‘n’ Andy.”

Amos ‘n’ Andy also had a major impact in the business of broadcasting — in 1928, Correll and Gosden invented broadcast syndication, distributing their program by recording to a “chainless chain” of stations from coast to coast. The program moved from recorded syndication to NBC in 1929 — but their syndication method is still an essential part of broadcasting.

In terms of comedy, Correll and Gosden were the first radio performers to present “character comedy” as opposed to “joke

comedy.” There was very little setup-punchline minstrel-show humor in *Amos ‘n’ Andy* — there was a little during the first year or two, but after that, it almost completely disappeared.

Instead, the humor grew out of characterization and observation — Correll and Gosden could devote an entire ten-minute episode to Andy reading Amos his junk mail, growing more exasperated with every sales pitch. Or Andy might buy a new suit and spend an entire episode trying to stretch the coat to fit, rather than simply admit the tailor sold him the wrong size. The comedy in the original *Amos ‘n’ Andy* was never laugh-out-loud knee-slapping funny — in the industry, it was known as a “chuckle show” — and the humor was always subservient to the development of the dramatic plots. But this sort of comedy was incredibly influential — it was the diametric opposite to the braying vaudevillians bellowing out jokes and catchphrases, and it inspired the development of the entire situation-comedy genre.

The humor in the original *Amos ‘n’ Andy* serial episodes may seem rather inaccessible for someone looking at it from a 21st Century perspective, and this is another obstacle to really understanding the program’s appeal. There is no trace whatsoever in Correll and Gosden’s work of the smirking self-awareness that characterizes modern comedy — there is none of the “I’m so terribly, terribly hip and above all this” ironic point of view that makes a detached sort of ridicule an essential part of the comedy. Correll and Gosden weren’t interested in ridiculing anyone — they were out to simply reflect the little foibles of daily life, and if you can get away from postmodern ideas of what humor should be, the simple sincerity of their best work is often quite charming.

TS: *How would you respond to someone who refuses to listen to Amos ‘n’ Andy because he’s heard that it’s racist?*

EM: There are many layers of interpretation to consider in “Amos ‘n’ Andy,” and most people are only willing to look at the surface. For most people in 2002, the thought of two white men using dialect in portraying black characters may be utterly incomprehensible. But there’s a lot more to the program than just the surface, and the deeper you dig, the more apparent the layers of characterization become. You can’t just listen to an episode or two, or read a couple of pages of script and feel like you know the program — it takes some effort.

The fact that so much of the program survives only as scripts and not as recordings makes this even more of an effort, and unfortunately it’s something very few people will ever see as being worth trying to do. It’s so much easier to simply dismiss the program, or to turn it into a racial talking point than it is to try and understand it on its own terms, and as a result much of the cultural-studies “scholarship” surrounding *Amos ‘n’ Andy* has been appallingly lazy. It takes far less effort to spout fashionable clichés about how the program “perpetuated the dominant cultural hegemony” than it does to spend years bent over a microfilm viewer trying to understand what Correll and Gosden actually wrote.

But for me, after having really taken the time to get to know the characters, *Amos ‘n’ Andy* is no more a show “about” race than *Moby Dick* was a book “about” whales. Amos and Andy and their friends represented universal human qualities and their “Harlem” was a carefully-constructed microcosm of humanity. Granted, it may be harder to grasp this listening to the broadly-played half-hour shows, but if one makes a conscious decision to view the characters as “people” rather than to insist on pigeonholing them as “black people,” the universal qualities of the program become much more evident. Andy is unmotivated, not because he is a “lazy and shiftless” racial stereotype — but because, deep down, he is afraid of failure. Andy allows himself to be manipulated by the Kingfish not because he is “stupid,” but because he is afraid to acknowledge his own vulnerabilities. Amos is not hardworking and incorruptible because he is some empty Uncle Tom figure, but because he is utterly determined to control his own destiny: he wants nothing out of life that he hasn’t earned, and he wants to owe nothing to anyone. Amos and Andy worked as characters because they personified basic human strengths and weaknesses. There’s a little Amos and a little Andy in everyone — and though we may not care to acknowledge it, for most of us it’s more Andy than Amos.

TS: *How much of Amos ‘n’ Andy has survived and in what form?*

EM: All of the scripts survive. Freeman Gosden’s personal bound copies of the entire run are held by USC, along with his extensive collection of scrapbooks documenting press coverage of the series, and this collection is available to researchers. The Library of Congress has copyright-

deposit copies of the 1928–37 scripts available on microfilm thru their Manuscript Division.

Recordings exist of most of the half-hour sitcom episodes, and many of these are widely available — although the later the dates, the less they tend to have in common with the original series. Unfortunately, very little survives in the way of recordings for the original serial — about sixty episodes are currently known to exist out of the 438 recorded for syndication in 1928–29, and less than twenty episodes out of the more than 3,600 aired during the network run are known to survive, most of them in fragments. It's unfortunately no longer possible to hear the series as it was originally meant to be heard.

TS: *What type of materials do you look for in your Amos 'n' Andy research?*

EM: What I have found most interesting are contemporary accounts of how listeners responded to the program during the years of its greatest success — fan mail, newspaper coverage, and magazine articles. An enormous amount of material was published on *Amos 'n' Andy* during the “craze” years of 1930–31 — clippings from that period fill ten large scrapbook volumes at USC — and I'm always looking to turn up material in obscure publications. *Amos 'n' Andy* was discussed in everything from fan magazines to professional journals, and there's no telling how much information has yet to be uncovered.

TS: *Is there any document you would consider the “holy grail” of your research?*

EM: Well, recordings would be at the top of the list — I keep hoping that somewhere there's a long-lost cache from the early thirties. The technology existed, but so far nothing substantial has turned up — but I keep looking, waiting, and hoping.

TS: *During your research, have you turned up any documents or information that surprised you?*

EM: I was surprised at just how deep the characters were during the program's early years, and how I began to find myself not simply thinking of them as literary or pop-culture abstractions to be put under the microscope and dissected, but as actual people who I knew, cared about, and enjoyed spending time with. As you read thru the scripts, and as you get used to the phonetic spelling of the dialect, you get drawn into the stories — and the characters come vividly to life. And when that happens, you realize just why this program became as popular as it did — and that Cor-

rell and Gosden were far, far more than just blackface comedians who got lucky.

TS: *What would you like the net result of your research to be?*

EM: I don't have any illusions about what I'm doing. Most people who read this are going to wonder what could possibly possess anyone to devote that much passion to something as irrelevant, as culturally-discredited, as hopelessly obsolete as “Amos 'n' Andy.” Most people who read this will probably shake their heads condescendingly, and congratulate themselves for being so culturally enlightened. But if just one media history student who's gotten a typically distorted and inaccurate idea of the program from her professor decides to think for herself about it because of something I've written — and if this, in turn, inspires that one media history student to try and knock that professor off her smug academic pedestal just out of principle — then I'll feel like I've accomplished something.

TS: *Is there anything else you would like to share with our readers or which you think they would find particularly interesting?*

EM: The controversy over *Amos 'n' Andy* tends to overshadow the fact that Correll and Gosden played an important part in opening acting roles on radio to black performers — not just comedy parts, but straight, non-stereotyped roles. During the run of their half-hour sitcom series, Correll and Gosden may have been the most active employers of African-American talent in Hollywood — using a large number of black actors in straight, non-dialect supporting roles. The legendary Dorothy Dandridge was one such performer — she appeared in many supporting parts on the series, along with her mother Ruby and her sister Vivian, from the mid-1940s to the early 1950s.

TS: *Where should readers go for more information on Amos 'n' Andy and your research?*

EM: “Amos 'n' Andy In Person,” at www.midcoast.com/~lizmcl/aa.html

The site includes a large number of excerpts from the original *Amos 'n' Andy* scripts, material which has never before been published, and including complete scripts for an entire 64-episode storyline from 1930–31. I'm currently in the process of preparing episode-by-episode plot summaries of every episode aired from 1928–37 — as of now, I've completed 1928–32, and these summaries are available on the Web site. ~