

Broadcasting's Biggest Bomb

Radio's Brightest Star Backing a New Coast-to-Coast Network. These Were The Ingredients of a Monumental Disaster!

BY TOM KNEITEL, K2AES, EDITOR

Nobody doubts the value of a celeb's name tied to a commercial venture—like Paul Newman's salad dressing, Gloria Vanderbilt's designer jeans, Liz Taylor's perfume, Mickey Mouse's wristwatches, Cheryl Tiegs' line of clothing, etc. Of course, a celeb tie-in with a commercial venture is no guarantee of success, and most celebs are smart enough to let professional design and marketing people do all of the actual work on "their" products. One notable celeb disaster involved radio, and a major star who decided to become personally and directly involved.

That star was beloved comic Ed Wynn, known as "The Perfect Fool," and star of NBC's immensely popular *Texaco Fire Chief* radio show in the early 1930's. Wynn's popularity was such that, in areas where it could be heard, 78% of the possible audience was tuned to his program. Even by today's standards, this represents a phenomenal chunk of the public's attention. Ed Wynn was no newcomer to the world of entertainment, by the time he had become a radio star, he had spent many years on the stage. In 1932, when he was 45 and at the peak of his \$5,000-per-week radio career, he announced that he was investing \$250,000 of his own money in a venture to be known as ABS, *The Amalgamated Broadcasting System*.

Keep in mind that this was during the Great Depression when very few business ventures (other than selling apples on street corners) were being started, and people were supporting their families on \$15 to \$25 per week. Wynn envisioned ABS as a national network, "an idealistic gesture" (he called it) that would offer employment to the 17,000 actors who needed work.

Getting It Together

ABS wasn't exactly Wynn's own idea. In 1919, he had met a Hungarian classical violinist named Ota Gygi ("former Concert Violinist to King Alfonso of Spain") while they were both in vaudeville. They maintained a casual friendship over the years, and in early 1932, Gygi showed up at one of Wynn's rehearsals with an idea that needed financing. Wynn had plenty of money and



Ed Wynn, whimsical, zany, and beloved, was billed as "The Perfect Fool." Despite his long and successful career as a vaudeville and radio star, when it came to starting a new radio network, he lived up to his billing. His son claimed that Wynn lost \$305,000 on his 1933 business venture!

was glad to help his friend, especially since Ed Wynn felt the concept had so much merit.

Gygi's idea was to organize a national radio network of small stations in and around metropolitan areas. This "third chain" would compete with CBS and NBC by providing a better grade of programming than they supplied. The idea appealed to Wynn, because it offered actors work, and would help the theatre in general.

Against the advice of many, Wynn agreed to go ahead with the idea, lend his name to the project, be its guiding light, in-

spiration, commercial coordinator, as well as provide the large amount of seed money to get the ABS ball rolling. Additional financing was supposedly provided by a mysterious anonymous industrialist, and it was hoped that eventually a stock issue would be floated so that the general public might own shares in ABS, too.

The Crown Jewel

The ABS master plan called for the network's headquarters to be in New York City, with network programs to be heard over a station in New York. Independent