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The Mae West Incident: Radio Censorship in the 1930s

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Poster for 'It Ain't No Sin' changed to 'Belle of the Nineties' by censors, 1934

Mae West's signature bawdy performance style always courted controversy, whether in her appearances on stage, film, or radio. Even once spending ten days in jail on obscenity charges early in her career did little to curb her overtly sexual variety of entertainment. In fact, she capitalized on the controversy to great success.

Although her screenplays were usually heavily edited, West's fondness for the double-entendre often allowed her to sidestep censors – nearly as often, however, it landed her in scandal. Such was the case when she appeared alongside Don Ameche and Charlie McCarthy in 1937 on *The Chase and Sanborn Hour* – a popular NBC radio variety show in the 1930s and '40s.

Content in the early years of radio was ruled primarily by the market and individual networks and performers. The Radio Act of 1927 gave the newly established Federal Radio Commission (replaced by the Federal Communications Commission in 1934) the power of granting licenses to broadcasters, which in turn controlled content to an extent. However, the FRC's, and later the FCC's, power to censor was limited simply to regulating “obscene, indecent, or profane language by means of radio communication.”

As a result, sponsors and advertisers played a considerable role in dictating content by supporting programming that reflected popular public sentiment and

generally shied away from controversy. Networks struggled to balance mainstream views with their desire to lure listeners, at times pushing the envelope on conventional entertainment. Featuring the already notorious Mae West on a Sunday evening radio show tested the limits of

what listeners were willing to accept.

The two-part, half-hour segment on *The Chase and Sanborn Hour* first presented Don Ameche along with West in the Garden of Eden, with Ameche in the role of Adam and West in the role of Eve. The sketch, written by Arch Oboler, redefined the role of Eve to better suit West's sultry style: Eve now became a sexual aggressor all too willing to sacrifice her virginity. She quickly proclaimed her boredom with Eden, invited Adam to "leave this dump," and seduced the serpent to obtain the forbidden fruit.

The second half of the segment featured West in a dialog with Charlie McCarthy, Edgar Bergen's ventriloquist doll, who is generally characterized as an adolescent. Laden with innuendo, West playfully ribbed McCarthy, telling him, "come on home with me, honey. I'll let you play in my wood pile," and later, "I thought we were going to have a nice long talk Tuesday night at my apartment. Where did you go when the doorbell rang?" "Well, I tried to hide in your coat closet, but two guys kicked me out," McCarthy replies.

The sketch provoked a swift reaction from conservative listeners and a formal and organized response from religious groups, such as the Legion of Decency. Founded in 1935, by the Roman Catholic Church, the Legion of Decency enlisted other religious denominations to support their mission of combating "indecent and propaganda" related to "sex delinquency and moral perversion." This censorship was directed primarily at film but included radio and other media. Other similar-minded groups, such as the Women's National Radio Committee, which sought to promote cultural programming that upheld "Christian values" on the radio, also kept a close eye on what they perceived to be Hollywood's moral depravity.



Ad for Chase and Sanborn Coffee, NBC sponsor, 1930



Mae West, Charlie McCarthy, and Edgar Bergen, 1937

One such reformer wrote in an editorial, "The home is our last bulwark against the modern over-emphasis on sensuality, and we cannot see why Miss West and others of her ilk should be permitted to pollute its precincts with shady stories, foul obscenity, smutty suggestiveness, and horrible blasphemy."

In response, the FCC opened an investigation and reprimanded NBC on the grounds of indecency. Rather than accept responsibility for the sketch, NBC opted to point the finger directly at West. The network argued that there was nothing indecent in the content of the sketch itself, but it was West's tone and style of performance that made it offensive. The sketch performed by any other actors would not have raised eyebrows in the least, they claimed. NBC barred West from any network programs, including any mention of her name, and she would not return to radio again until 1950.

Neither Don Ameche, Edgar Bergen, nor the writer of the sketch, Arch Oboler, bore any of the blame. In fact, the careers of all three blossomed in the years that followed. Soon after the scandal, Oboler was given his own NBC radio show titled *Arch Oboler's Plays*, while Don Ameche and Edgar Bergen continued to enjoy great success and popularity in television and film.

While reform groups such as the Legion of Decency and the Women's National Radio Committee protested loudly to the FCC about West's performance, these campaigns prompted a backlash of their own, as critics of the conservative voices wrote to the FCC and NBC in support of the broadcast, decrying FCC censorship. Many claimed that West's sketch was no worse than material performed by Fred Allen or Eddie Cantor, suggesting that her gender played a significant role in the official response. The mixed reaction suggests that mainstream American values were not necessarily in line with those of the more vocal reformist groups.

Even the *Chicago Daily News* wrote in support of West, asserting: "NBC and the commercial sponsors of the program knew Mae West. They knew her technique. They'd heard her and seen her. They coached her in rehearsals. But when the public protests swamped them they pretended they had Mae all mixed up with Mary Pickford or Shirley Temple."

Additionally there is evidence indicating that the Legion of Decency, which had long targeted West's films, had planned in advance to launch the protest of West's radio appearance. Rather than having ignited a firestorm with her performance, West was the target of a carefully orchestrated protest movement.



Edgar Bergen, Charile McCarthy and Fred Allen, 1946 Public Domain



Mae West, 1927, LA Times, Public Domain

Ultimately, the network yielded to the demands of the reformers and agreed to tighten its policies of self-regulation and practice greater vigilance. NBC began meeting with religious leaders and women's reform groups on a regular basis. They also rewrote their censorship policies to reflect stricter standards of decency. The capitulation to a minority opinion "helped to validate the demands of ...religious reformers and rejected or marginalized the huge number of Americans with more tolerant viewpoints." NBC's chief censor asserted after the incident, "While we have a notable case on our hands, the opportunity is ours to put [stricter enforcement of censorship duties] into effect and to obtain greater control over material broadcast."

The Mae West incident, as it has become popularly known, represents one of the earliest occurrences of FCC action against "indecenty," the consequences of which reverberated through broadcast networks. West's wanton disregard for the social order placed her squarely in the sights of moral conservatives, who saw her performance as an opportunity to further sanitize radio programming. Meanwhile, the FCC used the incident as an excuse to wield its licensing power to whip networks into shape. The incident and its aftermath serve to highlight the many forces that shaped radio programming in the 1930s.

Listen to an excerpt of the original broadcast here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wiRQu7F75Tw>