

# CENSORSHIP

## A WORLD ENCYCLOPEDIA

Volume I  
A-D

*Editor*

DEREK JONES



FITZROY DEARBORN PUBLISHERS

LONDON • CHICAGO

## AMOS 'N' ANDY

US radio and television comedy series, 1928–53

*Amos 'n' Andy* was a popular commercial radio and later television comedy series that drew on the “blackface” minstrel tradition that had its roots in slavery. The television programme was cancelled by the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) in 1953 after two seasons, due, at least in part, to pressures exerted by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and other civil rights groups.

*Amos 'n' Andy* was the first comedy series on network television in the United States to focus on African-American characters, although a short-lived programme, *Beulah* (1950–53), had featured a black maid in a white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant context. Because of the controversy *Amos 'n' Andy* created, no television producer or commercial sponsor would risk investing in a black comedy show again until 1968.

When *Amos 'n' Andy* came to television, racial segregation was still legally enforced in the southern states of the United States, and in much of the rest of the nation, blacks and whites had relatively little social contact. The mass media was the primary source of information about African-Americans for a significant part of the white audience. *Amos 'n' Andy* was the only mass-media representation that appeared to offer an inside view of life in an African-American community. Consequently the programme had enormous cultural significance for both blacks and whites.

Civil rights leaders objected to *Amos 'n' Andy* because they believed the programme would establish the formula for representation of blacks on television just as it had on radio. If this happened, they feared the racial stereotypes of the “comic Negro” that had been used by antebellum whites to rationalize and justify enslavement of Africans would continue to be perpetuated by television.

Set in Harlem, the story revolved around the activities of George Stevens, known as “the Kingfish”, an inept con-man always looking for an easy dollar. His wife, Sapphire, and her mother were strong figures, usually at odds with the Kingfish because they wanted to “refine” him. The character Andrew Brown was usually the target of the Kingfish’s schemes. Referred to as the “big dummy” by the Kingfish, Andy was a well-meaning but gullible simpleton. Amos was actually a minor character in the programme, a cab driver who seemed to represent the voice of reason. Madame Queen was Andy’s girlfriend and Lightnin’ was a slow-moving janitor. Much of the comedy centred on the absurdity of the Kingfish’s schemes and their inevitable unravelling. Malapropisms, mispronunciations, and misunderstandings were the primary vehicles of the ironic humour. Disjunctures between the parodied form of rural, southern dialect spoken by the black characters and standard American English produced the irony.

Based on stock characters drawn from the blackface tradition, Amos represented a classic “Uncle Tom” stereotype – simple, happy, eager to please; Sapphire was a shrewish, domineering “mammy”; and George represented a “coon” character – dandified, conniving, and shiftless. Derived from the word raccoon, “coon” is a pejorative term that was used by whites to describe black men who did not stay in their “place” within the racial hierarchy of segregated America. Within the black-

face tradition, white men (usually Irishmen) in make-up imitated and parodied black singers and dancers. In the television version of *Amos 'n' Andy*, the black actors were imitating whites imitating blacks. The original inspiration that lay buried deeply beneath these masks was derived from the folk cultures of West Africa.

*Amos 'n' Andy* was originally created and performed in the early 1920s by two white, vaudeville actors, Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll. They were the first blackface minstrel team on radio. Beginning as a local programme in Chicago in 1928, *Amos 'n' Andy* became a nationally syndicated programme in 1929. Broadcast by the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) from 6:00 to 6:15 p.m., six nights a week, *Amos 'n' Andy* was one of the most popular programmes in the history of radio. At the height of its popularity it reached 53 per cent of the radio audience, approximately 40 million people. Gosden and Correll became the highest-paid actors on radio, and were invited to perform at the White House by president Herbert Hoover. The programme was expanded into a half-hour comedy series, and ran continuously until it moved to television in 1951. The success of *Amos 'n' Andy* inspired many other blackface minstrel radio shows.

As early as 1931, the black press, led by the *Pittsburgh Courier*, a weekly newspaper with a national circulation, condemned *Amos 'n' Andy* as detrimental to African-Americans’ self-respect. A petition with over 740,000 signatures was presented to the Federal Radio Commission (FRC) in 1931 by the NAACP with a formal request to remove *Amos 'n' Andy* from the air. The FRC ignored the petition, and the protest dissipated until the programme was re-created for television with an African-American cast.

Even after production of the television programme had been cancelled, syndicated reruns of *Amos 'n' Andy* continued to be widely circulated by local stations in the United States for the next decade. In the early 1960s, the controversy heated up again. In 1963, CBS Films announced that reruns of *Amos 'n' Andy* had been sold to two African countries, Kenya and Nigeria. Shortly afterwards, the Kenyan government banned broadcast of *Amos 'n' Andy*. In 1964, when a Chicago television station announced that it was resuming reruns of the programme, it sparked another national protest. Sales of the reruns plummeted and CBS withdrew the programme from its syndication market in 1966. The programmes are, however, for sale today on the Internet.

The controversy over *Amos 'n' Andy* continues, especially among African-American intellectuals and entertainers. Despite the protests, the radio and television shows attracted sizeable black audiences. The television show was remarkably well-crafted for its time and the comic genius of the black actors Tim Moore, Spencer Williams, and Ernestine Wade, who played the leading roles, is now generally recognized. The emergence in the 1990s of a postmodern black aesthetic, which recognizes the ambiguities encoded in the performance and reception of the “double-voiced” narratives of African-American culture, has repositioned academic debates about *Amos 'n' Andy* within a more complex historical context. The postmodern position

does not dispute the presence of racist constituents in *Amos 'n' Andy's* representations, the commercial exploitation of the images and actors, or the legitimacy of the civil rights protests during the formative years of radio and television. It does, however, make the retrospective claim that the cultural meanings and interpretations of *Amos 'n' Andy* are more open, layered, and polysemic than they appeared to be at the time the programme was removed from the airways.

SUE CURRY JANSEN

### Further Reading

*Amos 'n' Andy: Anatomy of a Controversy*, VHS videotape, written and produced by Bob Greenberg: Avery Home Video, Burbank, California: available from Ray Atherton Distribution, 1986  
*Color Adjustment*, VHS videotape, produced by Marlon T. Riggs, San Francisco: California Newsreel, 1991

Dates, Jeanette L. and William Barlow (editors), *Split Image: African-Americans in the Mass Media*, Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1990  
 Entman, Robert M. and Andrew Rojecki, *The Black Image in the White Mind: Media and Race in America*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000  
 Gabriel, John, *Whitewash: Racialized Politics and the Media*, London and New York: Routledge, 1998  
 Gates, Henry Louis Jr, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1988  
 MacDonald, J. Fred, *Blacks and White TV: African-Americans in Television since 1948*, 2nd edition, Chicago: Nelson Hall, 1992  
 Rubin, Bernard (editor), *Small Voices and Great Trumpets: Minorities and the Media*, New York: Praeger, 1980  
 Wilson, Clint C. and Felix Gutiérrez, *Race, Multiculturalism, and the Media: From Mass to Class Communication*, Thousand Oaks, California: Sage, 1995

## ANABAPTISTS

Christian dissidents, 16th century

Forged in the cauldron of the Protestant Reformation, the Anabaptist movement has remained little understood for nearly 500 years. While its tenets are still practised today by various groups, the history of this radical Reformation movement is little known outside the ranks of its own practitioners.

While Protestantism itself is rightly thought to have been born in Wittenberg, Germany, with the posting of Luther's 95 Theses, much of its more revolutionary fervour arose to the south, in Switzerland. It was here, in 1519, that Ulrich Zwingli, a German-speaking priest influenced first by Erasmus and later by Luther, began serving as the "people's priest" of Zurich, preaching "nothing but the gospel". Among his followers was a group of young men to whom Zwingli introduced the Greek New Testament, recently published by Erasmus. Zwingli and his pupils continued to push for further reforms of the church with the support of the Zurich city council, which, when he separated himself from the church, employed Zwingli as interpreter of scripture.

As Zwingli's temporal power increased, his spiritual authority grew more precarious. His group of young scholars, led by Conrad Grebel (c.1498-1526) and Felix Manz (died 1526), had become radical reformers themselves, and found increasingly less grounds of agreement between Zwingli's compromises with the secular government and their own thirst for religious reform. After a disputation in 1523 concerning such issues as the Mass, images, and tithes, at which Zwingli bowed to the authority of the council, his followers began to work independently. The final break occurred over the subject of infant baptism, a practice condemned by the radicals and supported by Zwingli. On 21 January 1525, at the home of Felix Manz, a group gathered to pray. At one point George Cajacob, also known as Blaurock, rose and begged Grebel to baptize him. After receiving the baptism, Blaurock baptized the rest of the gathering. It was here that the Anabaptist movement - literally the "rebaptism" of those consciously willing to accept Christ as their Saviour - emerged.

While it seems a small thing in the present context, in 16th-century Europe infant baptism was far more than a religious

ceremony. It was also considered a civic duty, a version of a birth certificate. Upon baptism, a child was officially not only a Christian, but a citizen. Deliberately to withhold a child from baptism therefore was not only blasphemous, but akin to anarchy. Moreover the Anabaptists rejected the authority of the state over religious matters, and held pacifist views, including the practice of non-resistance. It was in this light that the long history of censorship and persecution of the Anabaptists by both the Catholic and Protestant states began. Rebaptism, treason, anarchy, and sacrilege were the charges the fledgling movement faced, and in much of Europe the preferred tool of censorship was execution.



ANABAPTISTS: From "Bloody Newes from Dover, Being a True Relation of the Great and Bloody Murder, committed by Mary Champion (an Anabaptist), who cut off her Childs head, being 7 weekes old, and held it to her husband to baptize . . .". Printed in 1647, when persecution of Anabaptists had virtually ceased.