

## Stereotypes on Radio

As with any other mass medium, early radio broadcasts made use of (some more recent critics might say “suffered”) stereotypes in dramatic and other programming. Often, the use of clichés simplified groups by labeling them as “other” (that is, outside the mainstream of society) and emphasizing differences between outsiders and the core society. Such reductive portraits may not have promoted universal brotherhood, but they aided radio show popularity by relaxing audiences so that they would continue to listen and to buy the sponsor’s products.

The focus here will be primarily on American radio’s “Golden Age” (to about 1948) with its greater variety of programs and stereotypes, with a few comments about radio in the years since that time. That there is less stereotyping today is clearly owing to the stronger sense of political and social correctness now pervasive in society.

### Precedents

The minstrel tradition began in the 1840s and produced two enduring stereotypes of African Americans: “Zip Coon” and “Jim Crow.” The Zip Coon character was depicted as an individual who wore loud-colored clothes, used language inappropriately (malapropisms), and exhibited an air of self-importance. The Jim Crow character, on the other hand, was mentally slow and exhibited features that Caucasians associated with African-American field hands: speaking slowly and moving sluggishly, with thoughts that seemed to match both speech and movement. In addition to these two enduring stereotypes, other representations of African Americans included the trusted servant and maid. Thus, from the days of minstrelsy there were also such figures as Uncle Tom or Uncle Remus, Aunt Jemima or Mandy the maid, Preacher Brown and Deacon Jones, Rastus and Sambo and the old Mammy.” These stereotypes persisted throughout the 19th century, became part of vaudeville, and later were transferred to radio.

Most Americans accepted these stereotypes as a real depiction of African Americans; they were, for the most part, unquestioned. Their comical nature became a defining feature of all of such stereotypes. They made Americans laugh and could be easily laughed at. Hence, racial stereotypes of African Americans served the interest of the status quo by articulating how African Americans would interact with white society, primarily as comedians and servants.

### Stereotypes in Early Radio

Early radio often used stereotypes of other ethnic groups in addition to its portrayal of African Americans. For example, there were the *Cliquot Club Eskimos* and the *A&P Gypsies*,

both programs featuring orchestras. Moreover, *The Goldbergs* also used heavy dialects and distinct accents, which had been part of the vaudeville and minstrel traditions.

Vaudeville programs that made heavy use of African-American stereotypes were also heard during the early years of radio. For example, the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) network broadcast a show featuring George Moran and Charlie Mack, cast as “The Two Black Crows,” during the network’s *Majestic Theater Hour*. New York radio station WEAF broadcast the *Gold Dust Twins* on Tuesday nights, another show that featured stereotypes of African Americans (played by two white men, Harvey Hindermyer and Earl Tuckerman) in 1924.

Variety show formats often featured minstrel routines during the 1920s. *Dutch Masters Minstrels*, for example, was first broadcast by the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) in 1929. Moreover, daytime serials also featured caricatured stereotypes of African Americans. For instance, in 1929, NBC broadcast a serial based upon the Aunt Jemima trademark of the Quaker Oats Company, the show’s sponsor. The focus of the program was the Aunt Jemima character and her family. All members of her family spoke with the heavy black dialect often heard in minstrel shows. (Significantly, and as was usual in this period, white actors played the parts of each character in this show.) Not to be outdone, the Cream of Wheat Company sponsored a program based upon its trademark African-American chef, Rastus. It featured musical selections performed by Rastus’ imaginary animal friends and minstrel-type introductions to each song.

*Sam ’n’ Henry*, created by Charles Correll and Freeman Gosden, made its radio debut on WGN, Chicago, in 1926. The program was based upon the minstrel tradition. Although this program never made network radio distribution, it served as the basis for *Amos ’n’ Andy* which made its debut on 19 March 1928 on Chicago’s WMAQ. The program changed stations and name because WGN refused Correll and Gosden a salary increase; as WGN owned the program/character names, a new name had to be chosen. Radio network NBC picked up the *Amos ’n’ Andy* program a year later. As a network program, it soon became immensely popular—even among blacks—because it drew upon the minstrel tradition, made use of vaudeville ethnic humor, and offered sympathetic characters with whom the audience could identify.

### Stereotypes of Foreigners, Women, and Children

Stereotypes of foreigners, women, and children appeared on dramatic, adventure, and comedy programs throughout radio’s Golden Age. Scripts pictured foreigners, women, and children as predictable creatures who would not cause anxiety in listeners.

### Foreigners

Historically, the number of immigrants to the United States between 1925 and 1950 barely equaled the number who entered in one important year—1907. Yet on radio, heavy accents and “ethnic” behavior routinely identified a large number of recent arrivals, nearly all of whose characters agreed to play by American rules. Radio boiled down the enormous Russian empire into Bert Gordon, the Mad Russian of *Eddie Cantor*, or Professor Kropotkin of *My Friend Irma*; all of Mexico’s richness was diminished into Pedro, *Judy Canova*’s pal. On *Life with Luigi*, Luigi Basco told his “Mama mia” in Naples about America with the terminal vowels that placed him as one fresh from Ellis Island. Typically, he affirmed the values of his native-born listeners by studying English in night school, avoiding an old-world arranged marriage with Pasquale’s daughter Rosa, and singing the ditty, “A-may-ree-kah, I love-a you, you like a papa to me.” At least two other shows dealt more cautiously with Italian material: *Little Italy* and *The Great Merlini*.

Similarly, Englishmen, supposed masters of snobbishness, were neutered into stuffy blimps (Harry McNaughton, *It Pays to be Ignorant*; Count Benchley Botsford, *Judy Canova*); cool, work-obsessed police officials (*Scotland Yard’s Inspector Burke*; *Hearthstone of the Death Squad*); or valets (*It’s Higgins, Sir*). Even titled gentlemen were domesticated: Lord Bilgewater couldn’t compete with *Al Pearce*, and Lord Henry Brinthrope catered to *Our Gal Sunday*. Untitled Britons such as Nicholas Lacey gratefully fit into *One Man’s Family*.

French characters, too, lost touch with authentic identity. Jack Benny’s violin teacher, Professor Le Blanc, suffered every time Jack produced a tortured “Love in Bloom” from his strings yet stayed because he’d still not been paid. He satisfied some comfortable expectation in the audience about starveling bohemians. *Alan Young* once disguised himself as “Pierre Eclair, decorator” in order to escape the rough treatment a real man might have expected at the hands of his girl’s irked father. The supposed French connection to romance justified the character of Mademoiselle Fifi, the sultry flirt on *Eddie Cantor*. Similarly, a heavily-accented French teacher at Madison High School generated excitement in *Our Miss Brooks*.

The same Americans who slammed their geographic doors to genuine foreigners admitted through radio a surprising number of often vilified groups, especially Asian, Irish, Jewish, and African American. Some Asians on the air had been part of earlier tales in other media: *Fu Manchu*; *Charlie Chan*; Ming the Merciless, dread Emperor of Mongo, enemy of *Flash Gordon*; and *Mr. I. A. Moto*. Many “Easterners” were servants or, at best, sidekicks. *Bobby Benson* had a Chinese cook; so did *Little Orphan Annie* and *Tom Mix*. Ling Wee was a waiter in *Gasoline Alley* and, a little higher on the excitement ladder, Lai Choi San helped Terry against the pirates, Chula

assisted on *Island Venture*, and Botak backed up *Green Lantern*. Asians often had simple two-syllable names such as Kato on *The Green Hornet* and Toku on *The Green Lama*.

Other linguistic clichés set Orientals apart from Caucasians. Goopy Foopy, laundryman on *Fibber McGee*, gibbered in a manic singsong; *Fred Allen*’s bumbling sleuth One Long Pan threatened crooks with his “lewoloweh.” However, radio soothed listeners by implying that the ancient empires were eager to adopt Western ways. From 1938 to 1940, *This Day Is Ours* told how a dead missionary’s daughter carried on his noble religious work, meeting small frustrations with grace because she had so much support from her adoring Chinese proselytes. The VJ episode of *The Charlotte Greenwood Show* (26 August 1945) featured the Chinese refugee Mrs. Lee who spoke, as the stage directions say, “definitely Oxford.”

Irish characters used more recognizable words but expressed equally simplified personalities. Many real-life Irishmen had become police officers, so Mike Clancy aided *Mr. Keen*; Harrington helped *Mr. District Attorney*; Sergeant Velie supported *Ellery Queen*; Mullins abetted *Mr. and Mrs. North*; Sergeant O’Hara facilitated *The Fat Man*; and Happy McMann backed up *Martin Kane, Private Detective*. These Irish helpers loyally appreciated their more nimble-witted superiors. Such public servants softened a second Irish cliché, that of the bibulous blowhard. Best exemplified by Molly McGee’s Uncle Dennis, this stereotype presented the Irish as ever thirsty and gregarious. *Duffy’s Tavern* seemed the logical gathering place for them.

Jewish roles on radio exuded sentimentality. *The Goldbergs* led this saccharine parade, followed by Izzy Finklestein, the helpful foil on *Kaltenmeyer’s Kindergarten*. Some characters, such as Papa David Solomon on *Life Can Be Beautiful*, became earth oracles in the pattern of Molly Berg. Others, such as the Levys of *Abie’s Irish Rose*, radiated warm humor. Similarly, another Finklestein on *Houseboat Hannah* and *The House of Glass* series projected exuberant geniality. Mr. Kitzel, one of *Al Pearce and His Gang*, and his namesake on *Jack Benny*—the one who offered hotdogs having a “pickle in the middle, with the mustard on top”—glowed with the same lower-East-Side conviviality that made Pansy Nussbaum on *Fred Allen* so endearing.

Black characters best demonstrate how small a cookie-cutter radio used to extract innocuous material from a complex culture. No George Washington Carvers or Marcus Garveys pushed their way to the front of radio’s bus. The lethargic Lightning could never do more than run errands on *Amos ’n’ Andy*; Molasses ’n’ January (*Maxwell House Show Boat*) could only be minstrels; Cyclone could only be a ludicrous handyman for the equally silly *Hap Hazard*. The most independent, Birdy Lee Coggins, kept house for *The Great Gildersleeve*, and Geranium the maid chatted with *Judy Canova*. Even versatile African-American actresses such as Amanda

and Lillian Randolph could only serve *Pepper Young's Family* and *Kitty Foyle*. Occasionally these characters bossed their bosses: Rochester van Jones twitted Jack Benny, and Beulah revealed a life outside the McGee household. Usually, like other outsiders, the characters portrayed by black actors merely augmented the lives of the characters they served, apparently content to live in the background and never rebel against middle-class expectations.

### Women

Female characters on radio were squeezed into some confining aesthetic corsets. On soap operas they endured, suffered, and occasionally triumphed. Some women assisted male heroes on detective programs, either as compliant secretaries such as Effie Perine on *Sam Spade* or tagalong pals such as Margo Lane on *The Shadow*. Ironically, women were perhaps more fully represented on comedy programs. There they could stretch social molds and carry on at least a century's tradition of amusing, ironic, and flamboyant female speakers. Radio controlled the clichés so they would not discomfit audiences or sponsors. Robert J. Landry suggested in 1946 that the comedy programs (usually aired on Sundays and Tuesdays) repeated formulas because "American radio fans seem to be profoundly amused by the troublesomely imaginative adult and the juvenile equivalent, or brat" (in *This Fascinating Radio Business*). His typology can be expanded to include six major categories of funny females:

1. The brat
2. The teenager
3. The single working girl
4. The household servant (usually black)
5. The girlfriend or wife
6. The erratics: older spinsters, meddlers, society ladies, rebels.

Replicating Max und Moritz/Hans and Fritz models, brats relentlessly demanded attention or treats or information. Pipsqueak kids rose above gender so that the 10-year old boy on *Daddy and Rollo* couldn't claim much difference from the girlish Teeny who pestered *Fibber McGee*. Many of these characters incorporated the mannerisms of *Baby Snooks*.

Radio exploited the pre-World War I discovery of teenagers by unleashing a gaggle of adolescents. The females varied more than their dithery male counterparts. Admittedly there were the nonstop talkers, such as Gildersleeve's neighbor: by the time she pauses for breath, he has forgotten his message. (She had been commenting on what a quiet man Gildy was.) She belongs with chatty flirts such as Veronica on *Archie Andrews*.

A subdivision of teenage girls, the almost-mother, include Marjorie Forester, who managed much of the *Great Gildersleeve's* household; Maudie, who kept *Maudie's Diary* with

wry sensitivity; *Corliss Archer*; *My Best Girls*, who ran their widowed father's home near Chicago; Harriet Conklin, the mature daughter of *Our Miss Brooks's* school principal; Babs Riley, who assisted her mom in helping father Chester lead *The Life of Riley*; and Judy Foster, who did more than go out with Ooge Pringle on *A Date With Judy*. All of these buyers into adult responsibility helped to rectify the slur upon young women implied by the twit or coquette images.

The Single Working Girl stereotype offered more memorable characters than their accompanied or married sisters. These plucky females toiled in a world they did not create. Alone but not afraid, they confronted a commercial universe that insisted they were more bother than aid. Most radio singles were eager to remove themselves from the workplace to the sacred space of a kitchen. They lived according to Elizabeth Cushman's maxim, "No girl should remain in business more than five years" ("Office Women and Sex Antagonism," *Harper's Magazine*). *Maisie* pluckily endured low wages and unpromising boyfriends while dreaming of fulfillment.

The U.S. census for 1950 listed more than 1.6 million "stenographers, typists, and secretaries." However, these vital functionaries appeared on radio as airheads. In 1953 Lorelei Schmeerbaum, stalwart member of the club "Girls Who Say No But Mean Yes" and adviser to *My Friend Irma*, announced that Irma had won the money to go to England. Lorelei's group tells Irma to order everything new. She does, and then wastes the money by buying a ticket to *New England*.

Only a few women workers earned some validity as mature individuals. A predecessor of TV's *Moonlighting*, the 1941 *Miss Pinkerton* allowed one woman to enter a man's world. A pretty, bright, principled young woman who inherited a detective agency, she enlisted as her partner a brash, suggestive guy who both attracted and annoyed her. Likewise, *Penny Williamson*, a war widow with two children, coped poignantly with life in 1950 as a single parent by selling real estate in Middletown. Connie Brooks, the unsinkable English teacher at Madison High, and Miss Spaulding, who taught night school for immigrants on *Life with Luigi*, also managed to stay afloat in the workplace.

Household servants were predictable. One need only think of Beulah (*Fibber McGee and Molly's* maid), or Geranium (*Judy Canova*) or Nightingale (*A Date with Judy*) to realize how automatically linked were the concepts of "house servant" and "woman of color." Here there exist traces of the wise woman archetype and a certain respect for people whom society often suppressed. Repeatedly, Birdy on *The Great Gildersleeve* moderated her portly employer's pomposity by reminding him of his own need to diet or to get closer to his ward Leroy.

The Girlfriend or Wife represented the grown-up female (as a group comprising nearly half of the total number of women in comedy). Whether she tried to teach *Slapsy Maxie*

*Rosenbloom* that there's more to life than boxing, or to soothe neighbors when *Lorenzo Jones's* inventions made noise, or to moderate *Fibber McGee's* bumptiousness, this helper civilized her man. Alice Faye took away Phil Harris' booze; Margaret Anderson sounded as wise as her husband on *Father Knows Best*; Mrs. Blandings altered her husband's schemes to build his dream home; Betty, *Alan Young's* girl, encouraged him; and Judy Garland on *The Hardy Family* preserved Andy from embarrassment.

Erratics include the many censorious Mrs. Uppington/Mrs. Carstairs (*Fibber McGee and Molly*) types who corrected grammar and chastened mischief. Fussbudgets almost drowned out a small group of revolutionaries such as Lucy Arnaz or *Hogan's Daughter* or Jane Ace (*Easy Aces*). *Charlotte Greenwood* managed to be single, moral, and peppy. When Gracie Allen wandered onto other people's programs during 1937, apparently looking for her brother, she flummoxed normally self-possessed performers such as Walter Winchell, Fred Allen, Ben Bernie, and Singing Sam. The transgressions of erratics could be tolerated because everyone understood that it was temporary.

### Children

Golden Age radio drew stereotypes of young characters from two deep wells of tradition. In public Americans looked up to the young. Citizens saw them as the lucky receptacles for their elders' accumulated wisdom and wealth; immigrants valued them because they could make a fresh start, learn to speak English well, and ascend socially. With luck and pluck, some admirable youths strove to succeed in adult-approved universes by helping their families like Horatio Alger heroes, or by comforting their elders with fey wisdom like that of *Pollyanna*, or by traveling so they could learn about grown-up activities like the jolly rovers of G. A. Henty and Edward Stratemeyer. Such characters might be called "collaborators."

The reverse of this optimistic view of children involved annoyance, helplessness, and embarrassment. Out of adult reach, past rational understanding, and immune to good advice, children were sometimes thought to have a life quite different from that of adults. This notion recognized that two forces contended in young people: the desire to belong and the bothersome urge to be an individual. Like the Katzenjammer Kids, spunky tykes discomfited adults. This second group of stereotypes may be called "confounders."

Radio judged, no doubt correctly, that abused, hungry, sexual, angry, homeless, or delinquent children would offend listeners. However, a medium that claimed to be immediate and realistic could not remain silent about young people, so it chose to present them nostalgically. Out of 55 programs that gave significant roles to young characters, 33 presented juniors who collaborated with adults. These collaborators worked to

keep families intact. *Mrs. Wiggs of the Cabbage Patch* managed her modest household (during the Depression and on the wrong side of town) with the dependable aid of her little son Billy. The two Nolan kids, Francie and Neely, helped their similarly poor-but-proud family in *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. In 1936 *Wilderness Road* (an early version of TV's *The Waltons*) appeared, reporting how five Midwestern "younguns," the Westons, helped their folks homestead in the 1890s.

Even kids such as the orphans in 1942 Buffalo on *Miss Meade's Children*—who, in some real world, might exhibit anxiety or use unconventional language—merely frisked through one radio day after another. *Little Orphan Annie* defeated kidnappers and despair throughout the 1930s. *Mommie and the Men* had a level-headed mother managing four "children" in 1945: three kids and one infantile husband. They resembled *My Best Girls*, the three daughters of a widower who dealt amusingly with events in 1944 Chicago. Ethyl Barrymore and her daughter and son cooperated to keep the Thompson family intact on *Miss Hattie*.

Perhaps the most palatable form of the sugary category of home-centered helpers was the comedy program. Jack Barry's son and wife compensated for his flakiness on *It's the Barrys*. In *That's My Pop*, Hugh Herbert's son and daughter supported him (in 1945) because his last job had been peddling sunglasses during the eclipse of 1929. Niece Marjorie Forrester helped her aunt manage *The Great Gildersleeve*.

The kids who glued families together blended with a second subset of collaborators acting in non-residential settings. *Dick Cole* took time off from the Farr Military Academy to foil Nazi-type spies; *Jack Armstrong* skipped out of Hudson High to catch gamblers; and *Frank Merriwell*, no nearer shaving in 1946 than he was in the 1890s, found a huge underground reservoir of water that would enable farmers to make a profit.

Other compliant youths moved beyond home and school to work with adult mentors. Sixteen-year-old *Jimmy Allen* scurried about the 1930s-era Kansas City airport in order to teach 1946 listeners that a bright lad can rise if he keeps his eyes open for mechanics who might sabotage planes. Similarly, Jimmy Olsen and Beanie the office boy worked to keep *The Daily Planet* operating while *Superman* was on the road (or in the air). Junior interned with *Dick Tracy* and Pat Patton. Penny and Clipper aided *Sky King* so enthusiastically that audiences knew the maxims he spouted would inspire them to imitate his career as navy pilot, FBI agent, and rancher-detective. Jimmy, the heir of *Tom Mix*, resembled another apprentice, *Howie Wing*, who was learning to fly (as his name suggests) from Captain Harvey in 1938. Even 10-year old Barney Mallory helped his war-hero uncle Spencer Mallory during 1945 on *The Sparrow and the Hawk*.

A final group of collaborators performed noble deeds with little adult supervision, but still in harmony with adult aspirations. At one end of this spectrum of apparently individuated

kids are Isabel and Billy, who hunted under the sea for misplaced toys in *Land of the Lost*. True, they were guided by a talking fish, but still they moved with relative autonomy. 1935's *Billy and Betty* scampered through perils, contacting adults only when they needed a policeman to take away the criminal they had collared. *Chick Carter* learned so much from his adoptive father that he could pursue criminals on his own or with his pal Sue.

In opposition to the goody-goodies, the confounders were an undisciplined parade of scamps who chipped away at adult composure. They were both male and female, with Red Skelton's "mean widdle kid" complementing Fanny Brice's *Baby Snooks*. For each pair of cooperators such as Tank Tinker who supported *Hop Harrigan*, there were opposites such as Archie and Jughead on *Archie Andrews* or Henry Aldrich and Homer Brown on *The Aldrich Family*. For caretaking niece Marjorie on *The Great Gildersleeve*, there was Leroy, the water commissioner's restive nephew; balancing dutiful daughter Babs was Junior, a true son of his fumbling father on *The Life of Riley*. In contrast to the attentive students of adult mentors (such as *Bobby Benson* and Tex Mason or Little Beaver and *Red Ryder*), there was Teeny, the exasperating kid who flummoxed *Fibber McGee*. Dinky added to the problems on *Today at the Duncans*, and teenagers such as those who dithered on *Junior Miss*, *Corliss Archer*, *A Date with Judy*, and *That Brewster Boy* did not exactly rebel, but their enthusiasms often torpedoed parental expectations.

Radio left each confounder's future in amiable doubt: would Harriet Conklin, sensible daughter of the high school principal, eventually marry Walter Denton, nemesis of authority but friend to *Our Miss Brooks*? Radio implied that this class of young people, like foreigners and women, might someday conform to the dictates of middle-class normalcy, but only after amusing tribulations. Darker visions of youth seldom surfaced. A few malevolent children appeared on science-fiction programs, but such characters were not typical in radio programs of the day.

### Radio Stereotypes since the Advent of Television

After 1947 the radio industry was forced to change owing to the new competition for audiences from television and the subsequent loss of national advertisers, as well as the movement of radio stars and personalities to television. Of necessity, the kinds and types of radio programming changed.

Despite these changes in the medium, racial stereotypes of African Americans and others did not change quickly; as they had existed prior to radio's Golden Age, they persisted after it ended. In 1948 Joe Scribner developed *Sleepy Joe*, a children's show that used black dialect and "Uncle Tom" stereotypes in its broadcast. *Beulah* made its debut on network radio in 1947. This program made use of the "Mammy" stereotype

with African-American actress Hattie McDaniel (of *Gone with the Wind* film fame) in the role of Beulah, after protests forced the network to replace a white man who had originally played the part. In addition to this program, several other network radio programs featured African-American women in stereotypical roles, often cast as maids and servants with flower names. (For example, Ruby Dandridge was cast as Geranium on the *Judy Canova Show*.)

Although the majority of stereotypes on network radio, even after the Golden Age, continued the negative portrayal of African Americans, other groups were also similarly depicted. Native Americans and immigrant ethnic groups were also stereotyped on network radio after radio's Golden Age. For example, *The Lone Ranger* used the Tonto character to denigrate Native Americans. Significantly, this Native American character referred to the *Lone Ranger* only as "Kemosabe," a word supposedly meaning "wise one" in an otherwise unidentified Indian language.

JAMES A. FREEMAN

("Stereotypes of Foreigners, Women, and Children")

GILBERT A. WILLIAMS

(opening and concluding sections)

*See also, in addition to individual shows and people mentioned in this essay, Affirmative Action; African-Americans in Radio; Black Radio Networks; Black-Oriented Radio; Gay and Lesbian Radio; Hispanic Radio; Jewish Radio Programs in the U.S.; Native American Radio*

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## Stern, Howard 1954–

### U.S. Radio Personality

Howard Stern is one of the best known and most controversial “shock jocks” on radio today. Stern’s early interest in radio stemmed from his father’s work as a radio engineer for WHOM (later WKTU). Stern attended Roosevelt High School in Long Island and went on to the Boston University School of Communication, where he first appeared on radio at the Boston University station. His first professional radio job was as a progressive rock disk jockey at WNTN AM in Boston. During the first 10 years of his professional career, he moved from station to station, working at WCCC, Hartford, Connecticut; DC-101 FM, Washington, D.C.; and WNBC, New York.

In 1985 Stern was fired from WNBC after pressure from upper management at the National Broadcasting Company (NBC). After several suspensions for refusing to follow station guidelines for on-air personnel, he was finally dismissed. Within a month, he was hired to work the afternoon drive shift on WXRK, a New York station owned by Infinity Broadcasting. This was the beginning of what was to be a long and profitable relationship for Stern and Infinity. After success in the afternoon shift, the show was moved to the morning drive slot.

The next year, Stern’s show began to simulcast on Infinity’s classic rock station in Philadelphia, WYSP. This was to serve as a test of the show’s potential for simulcast on other stations around the country. It was also the beginning of problems arising from the content of Stern’s program. By this time, Stern’s reputation as a “shock jock” was beginning to attract attention from critics. His program combined profanity, sexual references, and an argumentative narrative style with a “nothing is sacred, no holds barred” approach to talk radio.

In 1986 the show became the target of a religious campaign led by the Reverend Donald Wildmon, who proposed that Stern’s program be taken off the air because it was “indecent.”

Wildmon took his complaints, along with transcripts and tape recordings of Stern’s show, to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). He claimed that the content of the Stern show violated the indecency policy of the FCC.

The FCC had long held that indecency should not be broadcast during times when children were likely to be in the audience. The FCC developed a definition of indecency over time, initially focusing on indecent language or “dirty words.” The policy was upheld by the Supreme Court in 1978 in the *Pacifica* case. A New York station challenged the FCC’s indecency policy after complaints that it had aired George Carlin’s “Seven Dirty Words” monologue during the afternoon hours. The FCC maintained that the station violated the indecency policy by airing the material when children were likely to be in the audience.

The *Pacifica* decision upheld the FCC’s policy of channeling questionable content to a “safe harbor,” a period of time during which stations could air indecent material. After several appeals, the safe harbor was settled at the period from 10 P.M. to 6 A.M. As of 1992, the FCC definition of indecency was “language or material that, in context, depicts or describes, in terms patently offensive as measured by contemporary community standards for the broadcast medium, sexual or excretory activities or organs.”

Howard Stern’s morning program on WXRK, New York, and WYSP, Philadelphia, was broadcast during a time that was outside the FCC safe harbor for indecency. So, in late 1986, after reviewing Reverend Wildmon’s complaint, the FCC issued a *Notice of Apparent Liability* to Infinity Broadcasting. In it, the commission claimed that Stern’s radio program was in violation of the indecency policy. Infinity was warned to bring Howard Stern under control or be fined.