

Figures of Speech

Jon Arthur

It was a patently unblemished age when teddy bears attended recurring outings in the forests before returning to their homes around twilight to retire. Presumably following their precedent so did many adolescents. It was a carefree world for the most part, operating without broken homes, noxious values and problematical mores—an environment sans television, predators, the Internet, cell phones, ecological hazards, and international terrorists. It was an indisputable age of innocence in which good things normally transpired in the lives of the nation's wee ones—a kinder, gentler America then for sure. And some activists were passionate about preserving it.

Jonathan Arthur Goerss was one. He wanted to perpetuate it—to make the scenario come alive for the tiniest of denizens by focusing his skills there. And from it he realized a modest degree of acclaim and prosperity for a few years. Professionally recognized as Jon Arthur and by a host of enchanted adherents as “Big Jon,” for a while his influence in some quarters was incredibly potent. In the final decade of this nation’s reliance on network radio as a principal source of entertainment and information—piped into living rooms all over America—Arthur instituted a type of programming aimed at the towheads.

He was able to capture a substantial share of that audience as legions of faithful followers scrambled to perform his bidding to the delight of parents overhearing him.¹ They affirmed his positive reinforcement training. In reality, it was *he* who was supporting *them*, augmenting their roles in meting out the household responsibilities. Big Jon highlighted traditional expectations of younger members of the family framework. His suggestions made the jobs of older members just a tad easier simply *because he said so*.

At the middle of the 20th century, Arthur was the creator-producer-celebrity of not *one* but *two* national radio series. His rather startling sensation began with two hours of *No School Today* on February 18, 1950, aired live every week during its early years. To that he added an hour-long daily transcribed *Big Jon & Sparkie* on January 8, 1951.² At their peak in that decade this one artist

¹ On one occasion he asked the towheads tuning in to lift their hands over their heads but forgot to tell them to take them down. A quarter-hour later ABC’s switchboard lit up like a Christmas tree with parents all over America calling in to ask that he “tell them they can put their hands down now!” In many homes no amount of prodding had worked. Source: John Crosby, “The Pied Piper Marches On,” *New York Tribune Syndicate*, August, 1950.

² The dates of these series’ network originations are correct. Regrettably, as often happens, a radio historiographer published incorrect dates in the past, listing *Big Jon & Sparkie* as debuting prior to *No School Today*, and giving 1950 as a start date for the former on a different day of the year. Without verifying this with multiple newspaper listings across the country, the inaccuracy

commanded the ether on 275 ABC stations for an unprecedented seven hours weekly while reaching more than 12 million listeners.³ No other performer in network radio's history—not a ubiquitous Arthur Godfrey who seemed incessantly on the air, nor anybody else—could sustain that much time *all by himself*. With rare exceptions, as when a special guest dropped by the studio or an occasional second voice chimed in, Arthur did it all. He was “Big Jon” while impersonating 200 or more added figures in a decade-long run: two years on a local station, seven on a transcontinental web, and another year in syndication.

It was an incredibly remarkable feat. Yet had it not been for radical trailblazers like Bing Crosby, Groucho Marx and Eve Arden, Jon Arthur might never have met his destiny. Did the crooner, the zany quizmaster and the hilarious schoolmarm hone their talents on preschoolers? No indeed, but in the mid-to-late 1940s, they insisted—*demanding* isn't too strong an idiom—that radio chuck one of its time-honored traditions *for them*. Until they came along, recording a show in advance of its presentation was anathema to the foremost webs. Largely for spontaneity's sake (so it was said), in the early 1930s, edicts had been handed down from the upper echelons of broadcasting empires that programming must be aired live—never recorded. To attract and retain Crosby, Marx, Arden, and other balking celebrities, the big brass relented—violating one of their most sacrosanct rules. Once that happened, the floodgates were open to all and the transcriptions proliferated.

was picked up by several usually reliable sources and duplicated in multiple published works.

³ Shelby Young, “Others Recall Big Jon and Sparkie on Radio.” *Charleston (W.Va.) Gazette*, January 25, 2006. See also: Buxton, Frank, and Bill Owen. *The Big Broadcast, 1920-1950*. 2nd Ed. Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 1997, p. 26; and Cox, Jim. *This Day in Network Radio: A Daily Calendar of Births, Deaths, Debuts, Cancellations and Other Events in Broadcasting History*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2008, p. 39.

At about that same time, in 1947, Jon Arthur smelled opportunity aborning. For a while he'd been toying with an idea that would apply his own voice to create scores of accents to foster conversational dialogue in a feature positioned almost wholly at the preschool brigade. With the aid of a reel-to-reel tape recorder, he could turn his reverie into reality.

Before exploring his fantasy any further, there's a consequential question that categorically begs an answer.

Who was Sparkie?

In Arthur's inventive imagination, a Pinocchio-like Sparkie was "the little elf from the land of make-believe, who wants more than anything else to be a real boy." (Parenthetically, might he have been considered a *reel* boy? The pun is too hard to resist.) Arthur's aphorism was a colorfully clever container that supplied—in neatly coined imagery—some parameters that listeners required to properly identify the little make-believe urchin. The phrase was repeated hundreds of times during that venerated 50s ethereal epoch.

Off-mike his creator branded Sparkie as an "electrifying personality." The munchkin's energetically high-pitched speech pattern prompted his moniker, Arthur conjectured. Even so producing the dialect was a time-consuming exercise. It was accomplished by recording Arthur's voice at a slower speed and replaying that tape at a dizzying velocity. The procedure demanded strict synchronization between him and his machine—a process meticulously presided over by an engineer in order to simulate the illusion of a normal conversation between Big Jon and Sparkie. There was also lots of interaction with others among the show's many "personalities," all sounding like distinctly separate

individuals. Some of the more familiar characterizations included Mayor Plumpfront, taxi driver Ukey Betcha, druggist Clyde Pillroller, paint salesman Mr. DaVinci, and widow Daffodil Dilly.

When the radio networks initially expressed little fascination for Arthur's complicated tape-and-editing process, he wasn't thwarted. The intrepid entrepreneur formed his own production unit. By the early 1950s, at his Cincinnati base, he was overseeing a sweeping commercial enterprise of multifaceted proportions. The nucleus coordinated his broadcasting series, expansive personal appearances, publicity and advertising, a growing number of professionally recorded vinyl disc releases, and marketing and sales of an extensive array of added merchandise ventures. The latter included a line of Sparkie look-alike puppets, T-shirts, balloons and sundry other trinkets to mesmerize a rapidly expanding tribe of tots.

Arthur had clearly (and cleverly) traveled a long way from a conventional DJ filling the air chair during a three- or four-hour daily shift at a local station. In addition to his airtime chores requiring many hours of intense preparation before going on he was doing many things not found in most DJs' job descriptions. Beyond running a mail-order house of burgeoning proportions, he participated regularly in command performances at venues across the country, often donating his time to charitable causes.

More than 20,000 Bay Area youngsters trooped into San Francisco's Civic Auditorium ... to meet their best radio friends—'Big Jon' Arthur and Sparkie....

But 'Big Jon' and Sparkie had already given their best performance. That was down at the Stanford Convalescent Home the day before. They went all out for the children to whose benefit the proceeds from the San Francisco appearances will be spent.

You should have seen the hugs and kisses which marked the departure of the tall young man from Cincinnati after an hour and a half of charming fantasy watched by many of these special fans from their beds.

The kids loved him. Just as they clamor to listen to "No School Today" every Saturday ... and the adventures of "Big Jon and Sparkie" daily....

Obviously, seeing Big Jon in person did nothing to mar the illusion for the youngsters that "Sparkie" is a real individual and not just a speeded-up tape recording of Arthur's own voice.⁴

Arthur was a hot property for a while, maintaining a taxing agenda, and also might be considered an insatiable workaholic.

As Sparkie's popularity escalated, admirers of all ages petitioned for a physical incarnation. They wanted to *see* him. One authority recalled his

⁴ Ellis Walker, "Video Notes," *The Daily Review*, Oakland, Calif., September 21, 1953, p. 11.

manifestation out of thin air in this way: “For the first two years, Sparkie was an invisible voice. But so many fans wondered what he looked like that Arthur asked Leon Jason, a comic book artist, to create a composite from letters sent in by listeners. In only two appeals for ‘what you think Sparkie looks like,’ he got 25,000 pieces of mail.”⁵

Big Jon and Sparkie went on the road in 1951. A 6-foot-5 Big Jon dwarfed his 22-inch sidekick. At their public gigs the redheaded Sparkie exhibited pixie ears and eyes and was habitually attired in yellow slacks and red shirt that became one of the little icon’s trademarks.

On one of numerous escapades into the hinterlands during the halcyon days Arthur confessed that his own six-year-old daughter was the tipping point that led to the launch of *Big Jon & Sparkie*. Not only had she grown weary of “run-of-the-mill children’s radio programs,” he concluded, he had some concerns of his own. The shows Arthur’s youngster was tuning to at home were “too rough and too filled with Gunsmoke,” he allowed.⁶ In 1947, he convinced himself he could offer her and her pals something to improve the airfare for youngsters. She bit her nails as she tuned in *Jack Armstrong, the All-American Boy*, he remembered. “That did it. I was determined right then and there to take the blood and thunder out of children’s programming.”⁷ The creation of Big Jon, Sparkie, and other recurring figures was the result.

⁵ Dunning, John. *On the Air: The Encyclopedia of Old-Time Radio*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 85.

⁶ Don Henry, “Desire to Improve Radio Put ‘Sparkie’ On The Air.” *Big Spring (Texas) Herald*, November 14, 1955.

⁷ Lamparski, Richard. *2nd Annual Whatever Became Of...?* New York: Bantam, 1977, pp. 353-357.

Leaving fantasy behind, in the *real* world who was Jon Arthur and what was he like? Until now, most of us never knew. Did he, for instance, live in a make-believe existence? Hardly. Not only was he earning a living and raising a family, when the microphone was switched off, his activities frequently resembled those of people without celebrity status attached to their names. To discover who he really was one must pore over his pedigree.

Jonathan Arthur Goerss was the oldest of six children, the only son of a Lutheran minister. He entered the world on June 14, 1918, in the modest borough of Pitcairn in Alleghany County, Pennsylvania, roughly 15 miles east of Pittsburgh. His parents were native upstate New Yorkers as were their parents. Jon's great grandparents joined many of their countrymen in fleeing their Prussian homeland (now part of Germany) in the early 1840s. It was a time the Prussian government attempted to combine the Lutheran and Reformed churches to establish a state religion. About 1,600 like-minded Lutherans migrated to America, staunchly defending their spiritual traditions. Some traveled to Wisconsin to make permanent homes. Others, like Jon Arthur's kin, settled in 1843 at Wheatfield in western New York State's Niagara County. Most eked out a living by dairy-farming or operating small mercantile shops.

Several in the crowd were strong in their faith and felt directed to preach. They included Jon's father, uncle, and cousin. Jon's dad's brother, Richard Goerss, was a missionary to India. Returning to the U.S. after 18 years abroad, for a decade—until his death in 1941—he shepherded a Lutheran flock at Corning, New York. Richard's eldest son, Herbert Goerss, born in 1916—Jon's first cousin—joined the ranks of Lutheran clergymen. Finally, Jon's dad, Daniel Goerss, also

left farming to answer the pastoral call. He didn't remain in New York, however, taking his bride to Pennsylvania to pursue his divine quest.

Daniel hoped his only son would be similarly persuaded, devoting his life to ministry, too. That didn't happen in the conventional sense. But upon reflection, Arthur later channeled some of his professional career into ministering in what was to be an altogether unforeseen manner. In the way he pursued it he touched many more lives than had he served a mere sect of parishioners. He did so in part by teaching moral and ethical values during his tours in the air chair. Arthur promoted responsible citizenship by upholding the laws of home and society, both some unspoken as well as those inscribed in stone, while living by revered principles without preaching. By 1958, he was making recordings for young children that featured biblical narratives. A little later he focused his whole life's work on a faith-based ministry, potentially reaching millions of listeners of diverse persuasions and ages with his inspired missives.

By the time Jon Arthur graduated from Pitcairn High School, the hopes of the Goerss clan that he might pursue a professional ministerial career were dashed. It seemed evident the young man's course was to be set in another direction. As ringmaster of the Pitcairn High circus playing on March 11, 1936, he had reveled in the spotlight. After introducing the strong man, the ballet, tightrope dancers, figurines depicting varied sports, and a horde of added lures, he was hooked. The respect he garnered from it, plus the fact his classmates prophesied he would become a "future radio announcer," beckoned him to drop anchor in some as-yet-unidentified species of show business.

In the intervening time, though a half-dozen scholarships arrived to pave his way to college where he could pursue a call to ministry, he refused any such prospect. The country was right then in a deplorable economic quandary in 1936, the lingering results of the Great Depression. Jon Arthur saw an instant windfall for himself as an \$8-a-week salesclerk for Lang's Hardware Store in Pitcairn. During his brief service there nonetheless he exhibited a noticeably credible ability to write, something he had demonstrated earlier in high school. His superior saw an opening for himself by capitalizing on the young man's skill in a way that would benefit his small mercantile operation.

To the novice salesman was added the task of making up the store's weekly newspaper ads. One thing led to another. The youth's originality attained the notice of the local newsweekly's editor who subsequently offered him a post in the journal's advertising department. At \$10 a week Jon Arthur accepted and it wasn't long before his aptitude expanded: the tenderfoot wordsmith was soon contributing a humorous column to the paper, too.

At the same time this was transpiring, Jonathan Goerss—who had been smitten by the stage lights while a high-school student—was accepting every role he could win in local stage productions during his off-hours at the newspaper. All the while he was gaining still more experience as a showman. With each new opportunity, he reevaluated what he intended to do with his life. At 20, he made up his mind, choosing radio as his avenue of entertainment. After all, it was a budding industry in which thousands of new receivers—which also translated into patrons—were being added every month. Radio wouldn't be going away any time soon. Arthur viewed it as his meal ticket for life. In 1938, he enrolled at

nearby Pittsburgh's Microphone Playhouse to prepare himself for a career on the air. This pivotal occasion was to be the start of something big.

At the completion of his course the following year he was drawn to a new station in Beckley, West Virginia, WJLS. It had signed on the air just two weeks before his arrival March 20, 1939, when he debuted as one of two staff announcers. Actually, in such a small outfit, Arthur (at some point he altered his public persona to Jon Arthur) was an actor, announcer, disc jockey, commercial spokesman, and newscaster, wearing different hats at different times.⁸ The important detail not to be missed is that his broadcasting career was finally and formally under way.

His very first program to captivate the affections of the towhead contingent occurred at his premiering ethereal assignment. When a scheduled performer became ill and couldn't go on, his initial big break arrived. Arthur substituted for the absentee by reciting "The Three Little Pigs" nursery rhyme. It didn't matter that he was playing directly to only a couple of kids hanging on every word in the WJLS studio observation booth. The impromptu performance made a hit with them and, more importantly, with the station owner. The following day he was given a quarter-hour daily and a half-hour on Saturday to fill—both time periods aimed at an audience of youngsters—and a foretaste of things to come.

In the meantime on the sidelines during his debut at Beckley, Arthur was soon courting a local young lady, Mary Kathryn Vargo, then 19. Nuptials for the pair occurred on September 22, 1939. The groom was 21. To the couple was born

⁸ Adapted from Paulson, Roger C. *Archives of the Airwaves*. Vol. 1. Boalsburg, Pa.: BearManor Media, 2005, p. 59.

two daughters, Katheryn (Kathy) Jocelyn Goerss at Prudence, West Virginia, on June 26, 1941; and Mary Melody Goerss at Cincinnati, Ohio, on December 4, 1949. In the fall of 1950, however, only a few months after the birth of their second child, that union collapsed.⁹ Less than a year later, on August 18, 1951, Jon Arthur wed Rosalie Marlowe Reed of Ohio, who was also divorced.

Mary Katheryn Goerss provided custodial care for their girls, yet his daughters spent weekends with him and his new bride. In the meantime Lloyd Reed, a son born to Rosalie during her first marriage on August 6, 1943, lived with his mom and stepdad (Jon Arthur) in their home. After their mother remarried, Kathy and Melody Goerss moved to Virginia and lived with their mother and stepfather, seeing their biological dad much less often than before. Kathy was married a year after moving to Virginia while Melody was adopted by their new stepdad.

Rosalie remained Jon Arthur's wife for the rest of his life. She died at 76 at Fremont, California, on June 1, 2000, 18 years following his death. The couple had two children together: Deborra (Debi) Ruth Goerss at Cincinnati on April 22, 1953; and Daniel (Danny) Frederick Goerss II, at Stamford, Connecticut, on January 16, 1956. Further insights into Jon Arthur's private life will be presented at an appropriate interval.

Arthur's developing career took him to the Monongahela Valley Broadcasting Company at Fairmont, West Virginia, in spring 1941, and station WMMN. He was hired as assistant program director. Keep in mind that he was

⁹ Mary Katheryn Goerss wed Joseph Gordon Fickling in 1957 at 37. He died at 85 on November 6, 2000, at Atlanta, Ga., where they had lived for 35 years. Following his death she returned to their former home in Norfolk, Va., and she died there at 89 on July 21, 2009.

then 22 and growing up with an industry that was also still very young. (Network radio had begun less than 15 years earlier.) There hadn't been a lot of veterans in the business to point the way for youngsters to follow, particularly in the smaller rural markets. So it was young people like Arthur designing and implementing a framework out of which local radio operated.

Not long afterward, ca. 1942, he made the first of a trio of employment treks to Cincinnati.¹⁰ This move marked his transition from the small outlet serving a predominantly backwater audience to stations in medium-sized metropolitan centers whose reach covered wide expanses of geographical territory. For a few ephemeral months Arthur was on the dual staffs of legendary WLW, “the nation’s station”—an outlet that earlier beamed 500,000 watts across the country, by then reduced to 50,000—and a still less powerful sibling, 5,000-watt WSAI. On-air personalities appeared interchangeably on both stations. While WLW may have been among the most desirable spots to serve in local radio in America’s heartland at the time, Arthur and his colleagues might air over WSAI just as often.¹¹

For whatever the reason, Arthur’s initial sojourn in Cincinnati was transitory. By 1943, he shifted to another mid-sized market that also boasted a

¹⁰ At least a couple of published sources intimate that Jon Arthur may have passed through WLW’s portals earlier. Others, plus his adult progeny, opt for a later date, however.

¹¹ Cincinnati industrialist Powel Crosley Jr. bought WSAI in 1928, most likely for its transmitter at Mason, Ohio, a better location than the one WLW had been using at Harrison, Ohio. On May 25, 1928, the FCC gave Crosley permission to erect a 50,000-watt transmitter for WLW. He built it at the Mason (WSAI) site. For a while starting May 2, 1934, Crosley had authorization to crank up the WLW tower to 500,000 watts, a single station reaching most of America, unduplicated by others. Not only did WLW give the world *Famous Jury Trials*, *The Life of Mary Sothorn*, *Ma Perkins* and a few more venerated network series, it projected personalities to national recognition like Eddie Albert, Red Barber, Don Becker, Betty Clooney, Rosemary Clooney, Janette Davis, Doris Day, The DeVore Sisters, Harry Frankl (“Singin’ Sam”), Jane Froman, The Ink Spots, Hugh James, Durward Kirby, Frank Lovejoy, “Smilin’” Ed McConnell, The McGuire Sisters, The Mills Brothers, Dick Noel, Ramona, Tommy Riggs and Betty Lou, Rod Serling, Red Skelton, Fats Waller, and Andy Williams. For a time it was “the nation’s station” in spades.

powerful and influential transmitter.¹² At WIBC in Indianapolis, Indiana, he moved up the ladder from solely being an on-air personality to production manager. That probably established some credentials for him by getting his name beyond the local station. The following year (1944) he was hired by CBS in Hollywood as a replacement announcer, filling slots created by staffers who had transitioned into the Second World War. With some serious eyesight issues, he had been turned down already by several branches of the Armed Services.

After the war ended Arthur was tapped for another network gig. While he wasn't heard on the air this time, his gifts were. His flair for writing—which had led him from obscurity at the hardware store nearly a decade earlier into a passing journalistic pursuit—returned to the forefront and, like cream, rose to the surface. ABC Radio, still in its infancy as an independent web, hired him to pen the scripts for a summer comedy series broadcast from Hollywood and headlined by character actor Bill Thompson. Thompson is best remembered for voicing numerous droll dialects on radio.¹³ It was a blueprint similar to one Jon Arthur himself would be refining shortly.¹⁴ Gaining pervasive exposure on *The Breakfast Club* in Chicago in 1934, Thompson contributed to a plethora of radio series. His talent was to be recognized in the summer of 1946 with his own feature. The fact that Arthur was selected as head writer hints that somebody in higher echelons also believed he had exceptional writing gifts. For Arthur, it was a decided leap beyond merely reading the copy of other writers while on the air as

¹² At least one source suggests that Arthur relocated to Indianapolis in 1942: Sies, Luther F. *Encyclopedia of American Radio, 1920-1960*. 2nd Ed. Vol. 1. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2008, p. 39. Arthur may have made the move late in 1942.

¹³ Among Thompson's specialties were a handful of characters he impersonated on NBC's *Fibber McGee & Molly* between 1936 and 1953, including Horatio K. Boomer, Mr. Old-Timer, Nick DePopolous, and Wallace Wimple.

¹⁴ See separate chapter devoted to Bill Thompson.

a newscaster or DJ on one station and instead originating lines spoken by comedians on a national series.

The summer engagement proved to be just that, however. When it ended in September 1946, Arthur was again seeking permanent work. His next stop was to be one of the most celebrated along his entire broadcasting journey, the one for which he is still best recalled. He received a telephone call from Robert Sampson, then managing Cincinnati's WSAI for Marshall Field, the Chicago mercantile czar. Field had acquired the station from Cincinnati auto and appliance maker and media outlet and Reds baseball owner Powel Crosley, Jr. in 1944. New Federal Communications Commission rules forced Crosley—who also possessed the more powerful training ground for network talent and shows, WLW—to sell one of his broadcasting properties. Offered an on-the-air job with WSAI, Arthur accepted. It was to be his second sojourn in Cincy. A personal quest for notoriety was just over the horizon. All he needed was a vehicle to take him there.

By the way, on his arrival at WSAI on March 17, 1947, Arthur was officially a staff announcer, a designation that once again embraced a mixture of responsibilities. In that capacity his voice could go out over the air any time there was a break in programming, or a need for someone to read a piece of commercial copy. He was, in effect, “on call” during his scheduled shift at the station and often beyond. In June 1948, he gained a recognizable berth when assigned a daily DJ slot between 7 and 8:45 a.m., a potentially elevated audience time period. His show embraced news, weather, traffic and sports reports along with the recorded music he introduced.

The program had an unimaginative title—a mold customarily invoked on many local stations then—simply “Jon Arthur.”¹⁵ While it paid the bills, and he maintained shows like it during his tenure at WSAI, a motivated Arthur was seldom satisfied with the status quo. He began to scout around to see what other avenues might be open to him that would make a still greater footprint in his tenure where the river winds between the Mason and the Dixon Line. Arthur was just turning 30 then, and while his feet were planted securely on terra firma, it seemed he already had stars in his eyes. His vision for the future included a whole lot more than simply presenting recorded music.

We can't really be sure how he came up with the concept of dispensing his own voice to create an excess of characterizations, nor even how he was attracted to the reel-to-reel tape recorder to make it happen. Some time in 1947, nonetheless, it dawned on him that a mounting trend in taping material for playback on the air might be useful in turning himself into a surfeit of voices that could become familiar figures to a given audience. And speeding it up, or slowing it down, could diversify a transcribed voice into more and more dialects. He had had some experience already with programming pleasing to the moppet crowd, you recall, and decided to focus his attention to them with material appealing to their age level.

At some point he arrived at the principal depictions of Big Jon and his pal Sparkie, the little elf who wanted “more than anything else to be a real boy.” How Sparkie was to accomplish that end was never revealed and the pixie creature's wish was never believed to have been granted. But it made for part of a sterling

¹⁵ His DJ series was generically dubbed “Easy Listening” before his own moniker was applied to it.

epigram. Linked with the rousing tune of “The Teddy Bears’ Picnic,” it was a memorable opening, beginning with Sparkie’s customary salutation: “Hi, hey, hello again! Here we go again! Come on in the house! It’s time for [Jon:] Biggggg Jonnnnn [Sparkie]: and Sparrrrr-keeeee. ‘cause there’s No School Today!”

Big Jon spoke in normal tones while Sparkie’s prerecorded intonations were played back at much greater speed, achieving a Chipmunk-sounding articulation. That was only the start of it, however. Over the course of a decade, including two years on WSAI and eight over ABC and syndication, Arthur estimated he projected his voice into at least 200 different characterizations. A handful of those were recurring members of the cast and were instantly recognizable to the tykes and their elders who normally made up the Big Jon & Sparkie fan club.

There was a whole lot more than those chums with whom the two principal characters chatted, however. Arthur filled the Saturday morning *No School Today*—where he had more time to expand into diverse areas—with a profusion of attractive features that the boys and girls listened for. They included singing, storytelling, serialized narratives, and petitions for improved hygiene. In the latter he claimed to have a set of ‘magic spyglasses’ with which he saw into listeners’ homes and checked up on their routine habits (“inspection time”)—commending some and lightly scolding others by their first names for their hand-washing, teeth-brushing, hair-combing, bathing, bedroom-cleaning, rule-keeping, and more expected activities that week. For the spyglass diversion to

‘work,’ children were instructed to stand near their radios so Big Jon could score each one on sanitation and tidiness attributes.

“This inspection was so realistic that no self-respectable kid would dare listen to Big Jon and Sparkie if he/she was poorly groomed or had a cluttered room for fear of being ‘seen’ by Big Jon,” insisted radio historian Bob Cox.¹⁶ This was, to be sure, one of the parents’ and guardians’ favorite parts of his shows. A ‘movietime serial’ presented adaptations of literary classics like *Treasure Island*. Jon Arthur offered a grab-bag of positive stuff especially geared to preschoolers and all of it popularized him among adolescents across the country.

The characteristics of *No School Today* on Saturdays and *Big Jon & Sparkie* on weekday afternoons bore notable dissimilarities: the former supplied a myriad of stories, riddles, jokes, songs and other childhood-related activities as the latter featured a continuous storyline—combining spine-tingling adventures with straightforward humor easily understood by tiny tots. The shows relied heavily on a record library of thousands of stories and songs by notables like Morey Amsterdam, Hugh Brannum, Dennis Day, Danny Kaye, Charles Laughton, and Paul Wing.

On both series, in addition to the two namesake stars, there was a familiar cast of characters (figures of speech, mind you, and all Arthur’s improvisations) that the young listeners adored. While knowing now that one man was supplying virtually all of those voices, we didn’t know it then. It’s a fact that seems obvious to anyone hearing recordings of those shows from years ago in the present, yet it’s perplexing that so few of us hearing them in the 1950s caught on to the taped

¹⁶ <http://bcyesteryear.com/fulltext.php?article=25>

trickery. We were duped into thinking that lots of people were acting out their roles in a radio studio somewhere in Cincinnati at best, and possibly—depending on the current adventure—encountering it right then on the other side of the earth! Even that part about the city of origination wasn't true for part of those programs' airlife.

There were two more live individuals connected with the Arthur series on which they absolutely depended. One was technical director William J. Mahoney, Jr., who occasionally voiced the part of Gil Hooley, conductor of the show's mythical Leprechaun Marching Band. Just as crucial to the success was Donald Kortekamp who penned the lines that Arthur spoke in those scores of dialects. Together Arthur, Mahoney and Kortekamp formed a team that was unbeatable and persisted for the decade the series were on the ether.

After Big Jon & Sparkie became a draw for WSAI starting in 1948, station owner Marshall Field sensed the potential of an expanded horizon for his Cincy outlet, an ABC affiliate. Field lobbied ABC executives in New York on behalf of the popular Arthur series. Why should just one market enjoy the benefits of such programming? he reasoned. After all, if its appeal was strong among kids in Cincinnati, wouldn't it charm the small fry in other localities as well?

ABC hadn't been a separate network but a few years. It had broken off from NBC (where it had been known as the Blue Network) in the early 1940s by order of the FCC. In the late 1940s, it still had lots of hours to fill. Jon Arthur and company appeared to offer something fresh and the ABC brass took a chance on him on Saturday mornings. They didn't regret it. Arthur was initially given a two-hour block of network time at 8 a.m. in the Central zone.

No School Today premiered on ABC on February 18, 1950. It quickly found a national audience just as Marshall Field had expected.¹⁷ Less than 11 months hence, on January 8, 1951, an hour-long *Big Jon & Sparkie* series was added to ABC's Monday-through-Friday lineup. As already noted, his seven hours of network air gave Arthur more national access than any other single performer for a full year.

Not long into the chain-fed venture Arthur's activities with the mythical people he had created began to vigorously expand. Opportunities appeared and Arthur, who proved to be an astute businessman, was quick to take advantage of them. *Billboard* magazine, a reflector of the entertainment industry, reported on February 24, 1951, in the second month both Arthur series were transmitted on national airwaves: "Columbia Records has inked Jon Arthur creator of the Jon Arthur and Sparkie characters of the No School Today radio airtimer, to a term wax pact. Arthur has waxed four sides on current release as two 11-inch singles packaged for the moppet market." This was but one pithy indication of a rapidly developing channel of marketable activities Arthur was to delve into over the next few years as his programs touched a new summit. Just two months later, on April 21, 1951, the same publication noted that Joe Davis of Beacon Music, a Broadcast Music, Inc. affiliate, had acquired "exclusive publication rights to Jon

¹⁷ According to *Billboard*, ironically, on December 16, 1950, the same year *No School Today* went on ABC and only a few weeks shy of *Big Jon & Sparkie's* debut there, WSAI general manager Robert Sampson announced that the outlet had been sold for \$350,000 to Detroit's Fort Industry Company. Marshall Field purchased WSAI for \$550,000 from Crosley six years earlier and had persuaded the network to give Arthur's programs a wider audience, you recall. Fort's time with WSAI was even more fleeting while the property's value continued diminishing. On June 13, 1953, *Billboard* reported that Sherwood Gordon of Rockville Center, Long Island, New York, had bought the station for \$225,000. By then, Jon Arthur was no longer associated with WSAI except as one with ABC gigs relayed to it that reached the Cincinnati audience.

Arthur's Big Jon and Sparky tunes and has a folio in preparation which will include songs Arthur has recorded for Columbia.”

Other ventures such as public appearances, the creation of a Sparkie puppet and many more related merchandise items for direct mail sales began to proliferate outside the broadcasting studio. In the latter 1950s, a Jon Arthur Record Shop managed by Ed Quinn was operating in Cincinnati. All of it, of course, was pegged to his broadcast performances, with sales stimulated by those shows airing six days a week. Arthur's virtual one-man operation at its start began to develop into something of a gargantuan side industry.¹⁸ With little professional training, guidance and experience in marketing and running a commercial enterprise, he initiated his business and steered it for a few years into a profitable trade. A newspaper recounted some of the behind-the-scene details.¹⁹

Between January-March 1951, WSAI general manager Robert Sampson bought Marshall Field's interest in Jon Arthur's programs and formed a company with Arthur dubbed "Robert Sampson Enterprises" to handle the programs. They were making plans for a TV show. The Sparkie marionette was being designed. "Robert Sampson Enterprises" had issued

¹⁸ On March 3, 1951, *Billboard* observed that Robert Sampson was resigning as general manager of WSAI (which had recently been sold) to devote full time as business manager of Jon Arthur's interests. This substantiated how far the disc jockey-staff announcer had traveled since going on the network 14 months earlier. Sampson's WSAI service had begun in November 1945.

¹⁹ Adapted from *The Corpus Christi (Tex.) Times*, June 8, 1951.

licenses to manufacturers to make Sparkie T-shirts, coloring books, and picture puzzles. Negotiations were under way to license Sparkie comic books, dolls and toys.

In the meantime there were other developments occurring. Arthur's contract with WSAI ended in mid 1951 and wasn't renewed. On July 1 of that year his programs shifted their origination from the WSAI studios to new ABC facilities in downtown Cincinnati. Limited space at WSAI was given for the move and that station continued to air Arthur's programs. He was, incidentally, the only tenant occupying the new ABC facilities. A televersion of *Big Jon & Sparkie* was also planned for fall debut over Cincinnati's WCPO-TV.²⁰ The latter was delayed; a filmed 13-week video production of *No School Today* was scheduled for fall 1952 release.²¹ An early 1953 review of the series beamed over WCPO-TV termed it "a natural for the moppets" and noted "This one looks like a cinch to catch on."²²

Meanwhile, Big Jon and Sparkie's first personal appearance in the spring of 1952 in Houston received thunderous approbation and Arthur was deluged with requests for similar tours.²³ A second show was set in Wichita, Kansas; a third in Charleston, West Virginia. A slew of added performances followed including a week of appearances at the California State Fair that September and

²⁰ *Billboard*, June 9, 1951.

²¹ *Billboard*, June 7, 1952.

²² *Billboard*, February 14, 1953.

²³ *Billboard*, June 7, 1952.

many other subsequent events across the country.²⁴ The allure of actually seeing the little elf Sparkie, whom they had heard on radio, was too much for many youngsters to resist when the stage show visited their area. Thousands of children and their parents tuning in were in those local audiences.

No School Today, the two-hour spectacle that launched the manifestation on the national ether February 18, 1950, was trimmed to 90 minutes in 1952, and persisted through October 4, 1957, when it was finally removed from ABC's lineup. It was syndicated for another year in some cities, however. While *Big Jon & Sparkie*, debuting January 8, 1951, was initially reduced to a half-hour on March 31, 1951, and a quarter-hour on December 31, 1951, it lasted to February 12, 1954, when the network withdrew it.

Upon Arthur's signing a new contract with ABC in mid 1954, the web felt it was desirable to originate *No School Today* from its broadcast center in New York. While this totally suited Arthur it didn't strike series writer Don Kortekamp in the same way. Kortekamp was a native Cincinnati and maintained a lucrative freelance legacy with some Cincy advertising agencies, private industry and as a WSAI continuity copywriter in addition to the Arthur features. He remained behind while still penning scripts for Arthur. The producer and star, meanwhile, pulled up roots in Cincinnati late in 1955, and moved his family to Stamford, Connecticut, less than an hour from ABC's base of operations. *No School Today* was taped at his home in Connecticut in those days,

²⁴ *Billboard*, June 12, 1952; July 26, 1952; August 30, 1952.

one of his children remembers. At about that time a Texas newspaper revealed how the public appearance trips intersected with the taping.²⁵

So that Sparkie won't get tired of traveling so much, Big Jon takes him back to Connecticut about every three weeks. There they make their weekly radio shows for the period of time they plan to be away from home. They stay at home about a month between road trips.

"We would have too much trouble making the 'No School Today' programs while traveling," Sparkie said, "and besides we like to mention local incidents in our program, such as the rains and floods at home.

"Big Jon says we don't have to carry as much equipment around with us either if we tape it before going on the trips," added the little elf who wants to be a real boy.

"I've already seen and talked to over one and a half million boys and girls and their parents. Jon says that about 20 per cent and sometimes up to half of the audience is mothers and daddies."

²⁵ Don Henry, "Desire to Improve Radio Put 'Sparkie' On The Air," *Big Spring (Texas) Herald*, November 14, 1955.

A number of signal honors came Arthur's way such as when *Radio-Television Daily* cited *No School Today* on March 4, 1956, as "the best children's program." Not long afterward, on December 16, 1956, *No School Today* won the Thomas Alva Edison Foundation award, once again as "best children's program." The tributes were plentiful, underscoring Arthur's successful air escapades and the public aura and sales-oriented paraphernalia surrounding it.

To be sure, Arthur didn't generate universal esteem, however, particularly in the reflective epoch since his shows aired. In fairness, some modern pundits were less than charitable in assessing the exploits. One sage, whose adolescence was devoted to recurring appearances in the popular children's fairy tale reenactments aired over CBS on *Let's Pretend*, disparaged a couple of kids' features, *Smilin' Ed McConnell's Buster Brown Gang* and *Big Jon & Sparkie*. They are, he allowed, "interesting only because they represent the insufferably cute 'itty-bitty-kiddie' approach to children's broadcasting to which Nila Mack [creator-director of *Let's Pretend*] ... never gave in."²⁶

Yet another scribe classified Arthur's shows as "fairly treacly affairs" (overly sweet, thick and sticky, as Webster delineates), not a particularly benevolent description.²⁷ Surprisingly, there were some eminent sources surveying the terrain of children's radio programming that missed Arthur's

²⁶ Anderson, Arthur. *Let's Pretend: A History of Radio's Best Loved Children's Show by a Longtime Cast Member*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1994, p. 180.

²⁷ Nachman, Gerald. *Raised on Radio: In Quest of The Lone Ranger, Jack Benny, Amos 'n' Andy, The Shadow, Mary Noble, The Great Gildersleeve, Fibber McGee and Molly, Bill Stern, Our Miss Brooks, Henry Aldrich, The Quiz Kids, Mr. First Nighter, Fred Allen, Vic and Sade, Jack Armstrong, Arthur Godfrey, Bob and Ray, The Barbour Family, Henry Morgan, Our Gal Sunday, Joe Friday, and Other Lost Heroes from Radio's Heyday*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1998, p. 193.

network exploits altogether.²⁸ On the other hand, yet another contemporary insists his work was “one of the most important and poignant pieces of childhood.”²⁹ Take your pick.

Many of *Big Jon & Sparkie*'s counterparts left the air in the early 1950s when Arthur was only cranking up nationally. All good things come to an end finally. Once the chain pulled the plug on *No School Today* in October 1957, the show remained on the ether in many markets in taped re-runs for another year. “No School Today’ is no longer heard here” wrote a thoughtful reader to her local newspaper in California. “Can anything be done?” The journal’s media columnist replied: “I doubt it. The network just snuffed out Sparkie and Big Jon (Arthur) to make room for another music and patter show.”³⁰

Never mind that.

In the summer of 1954, the American Broadcasting Company had “signed an exclusive five-year contract with Jon Arthur.”³¹ Three years hence it wasn’t worth the paper it was written on; children’s programs were anathema to the transcontinental webs (*Bobby Benson and the B-Bar-B Riders*, *Jack Armstrong*, *Let’s Pretend*, *The Lone Ranger*, *Smilin’ Ed and His Buster Brown Gang* and any of a dozen other familiar aural features airing in that decade were no longer there). As far as ABC went, Arthur was history, his contract notwithstanding.

And what was in store for him next? The following few years embraced a plethora of income-producing activities. In 1958, the Goerss clan moved to

²⁸ Included in their number are *Radio Mystery and Adventure and Its Appearances in Film, Television and Other Media* (Jim Harmon, McFarland) and *Storytelling in the Pulp, Comics, and Radio: How Technology Changed Popular Fiction in America* (Tim DeForest, McFarland).

²⁹ Dunning, John. *On the Air: The Encyclopedia of Old-Time Radio*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 85.

³⁰ Ellis Walker, “Video Notes,” *The Daily Review*, Oakland, Calif., Oct. 31, 1957, p. 25.

³¹ *The New York Times*, June 23, 1954.

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (just 15 miles from Jon Arthur's native home, and the city where he attended radio school). He worked for a local TV station there. At the same time the radio series was syndicated.

One of the spin-offs of his notoriety was a set of recordings under the banner "Old Testament Bible Stories" including a half-dozen biblical incidents narrated by Arthur. The vinyl discs were produced by Judson Records and were part of an adolescent-oriented storytelling wave that had caught on by the spring of 1958, presumably attracting gratifying numbers of purchasers. Revered publications like *Billboard* and *The New York Times*—both of which kept their readers abreast of the Arthur phenomena while it mushroomed—acclaimed the extension of his latest escapades through flattering reviews.³² Was recording scriptural tales for tots a return to Arthur's roots? Or an expression of his personal values? Or maybe merely a matter of economics? Some of all three may have been exhibited.

For a while, starting in November 1958, the Goerss family—including Jon and wife Rosalie, Lloyd, Debi and Danny—lived in Seoul, Korea. As an American advisor to the Korean government in broadcasting, Arthur trained South Koreans to operate radio broadcasting apparatus. All of it was conducted under auspices of a U.S. International Cooperation Administration module.³³ Returning to Cincinnati in February 1961, Arthur was "scouting for a new post" according to the press. He negotiated unsuccessfully with the city's WCPO-TV to fill a 90-

³² *Billboard*, April 7, 1958; *The New York Times*, May 11, 1958.

³³ Congress formed the U.S. International Cooperation Administration in 1950 "to aid the efforts of peoples to develop their resources and improve their living and working conditions and to encourage the exchange of technical knowledge of skills." It's since renamed the Agency for International Development.

minute timeslot in its schedule. But a fleeting third stint in town was to be his fortune at any rate: Arthur ultimately consummated a deal with WKRC Radio for a daily 2-to-5 p.m. show, later expanded to fill the prestigious drive-time period between 2:05 and 6:10 p.m.³⁴ It was his final shift in Cincinnati, a place that had been extraordinarily good to him over an intermittent epoch that eventually embraced two decades (1942-1962).

At the conclusion of his service at WKRC in 1962, the family moved to California where many of them, including Jon Arthur, would live out the rest of their days. Initially residing at Tarzana, Arthur pursued opportunities in Hollywood although depressingly, nothing permanent was panning out for him in southern California. Finally he was offered and accepted a full time responsibility with KKHI Radio in San Francisco and the Goerss clan relocated to northern California. “As we were moving from LA to SF, KKHI’s owner sold the station and the format [was] changed. Dad was out of a job,” Deborra Goerss Lay recalls.³⁵ With every possible door he could think of to knock on securely shut tightly in his face, Arthur had reached a watershed crisis in his life: an altogether unanticipated course correction was about to turn his professional and personal lives upside down. It was, he realized years later, the best thing that could have happened to him.

One of his brood sets the stage for what transpired next.³⁶

³⁴ *Billboard*, February 6, 1961, and February 20, 1961; *The Hamilton (Ohio) Journal*, November 4, 1961.

³⁵ E-mail from Deborra Goerss Lay to the author, June 9, 2010. Used by permission.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

Once he had children, he attended services at the Lutheran church. He actually sent all of us children to Sunday school and catechism. I suspect he did this because “it was the right thing to do.”

Dad loved to read, [to] study and learn and was, by nature, an avid “student”.... He loved astronomy and science and, as a child, wanted to pursue that. Once he was “on his own” he studied many different religions and, as he put it once, sort of developed his “own religion” that included all kinds of things he had studied including Eastern religion, spiritualism, reincarnation, psychics, extraterrestrials, flying saucers, the occult, the paranormal ... and he added his understanding of “Christ” at that time.

In 1957, Dad was exposed to a different kind of Christianity, as he had known it, when the evangelist Billy Graham came to New York while Dad was at ABC. During the time of his crusade, colleagues of Dad’s “became Christians” and he saw a change in their lives. It was in 1962, after many experiences and much study in seeking “truth,” he decided to become a “born again Christian” as Rev. Graham had preached and “gave his life to Christ.” This was just before we

moved to California. His life changed dramatically at that point.

In a mid 1970s broadcast interview Arthur freely allowed that he hadn't darkened the door of any church during his first three years in radio. He rebelled, he confessed, after living in a parsonage and growing up under a magnifying glass where his private life was open to the community. "I wasn't a Christian then," he admitted. It was 1963 when "God closed all the wrong doors and opened all the right ones."³⁷ He had looked for work to sustain his family in Los Angeles and San Francisco but the channels that had traditionally welcomed him in the past appeared no longer viable. Although he was just 45, he didn't command the attention any longer that once beckoned him.

Placing his trust wholly in Jesus Christ, he received an offer to go on the air at the Family Radio outlet, KEAR, in San Francisco. While it paid just \$400 monthly, he accepted, and launched an extension of his career into territory he wouldn't have deemed possible only a short time earlier. He made a 180-degree turn and his career became a "ministry." The last 19 years of his life would be devoted to inspirational programming beamed around the globe, and Big Jon & Sparkie would be reprised as a major part of Arthur's new course. *The Christian Home, Radio Reading Circle, Even Song, Prelude to Worship* and *The Quiet Hours* were titles of some of his recurring features on Family Radio.³⁸

³⁷ Family Radio memorial tribute broadcast shortly after Jon Arthur's death on February 24, 1982.

³⁸ Family Radio maintains it is "thoroughly committed to the Person and salvation work of Jesus Christ as revealed in God's divine, infallible word, the Bible." It's a nondenominational, noncommercial, nonprofit, listener-supported, 24-hour, Christian ministry. For a succinct overview of Family Radio, see Lochte, Bob. *Christian Radio: The Growth of a Mainstream Broadcasting Force*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2006, pp. 159-161.

This shift in focus became very real to him and his audience as evidenced by this prayer he uttered on one broadcast toward the end of his life:

I thank you Lord for the ministry of Family Radio ... I thank you for the years of joy that have been for me to minister here with the various programs ... I thank you for my brothers and sisters who labor in the ministry, who devote their lives to it ... for all the announcers, for all the secretaries, for all the engineers, for all the writers and the producers.... Most of all, Heavenly Father, I thank you, God, for the ministry of your Holy Spirit, who takes the words that we speak and the music that we play and songs that we sing and sends them on the winds around the world so people may hear about Jesus, your only begotten Son—I love you, Lord Jesus, hallelujah, hallelujah ... Keep us knit together Lord Jesus until the very end ... Keep us faithful to your Word ... Give us the strength to minister day and night around the clock, hallelujah, oh hallelujah ... Thank you Lord Jesus ... Thank you Heavenly Father, oh hallelujah!

One of Arthur's Family Radio shows, *No School Today*, heard on Saturdays, embraced "The Further Adventures of Big Jon & Sparkie," Bible

dramas, lighthearted and religious songs, and birthdays at the end of every program—a throwback to the original format. The Family Radio programs reprised familiar Sparkie songs from years before including “Little Red Caboose,” “Cincinnati Dancing Pig,” variations of “Happy Birthday” tunes and of course the melody that was consistently linked to those programs as its theme, “The Teddy Bears’ Picnic.”³⁹

On one occasion Arthur was engaged in an exchange about his Family Radio series. In a rather surprising revelation, he allowed: “In my mind all my programs are adult programs which children seem to enjoy. I do not broadcast to children as such. That’s not my orientation. We have a very large adult audience.”⁴⁰ Although his observations may have been applicable in the 1970s, in the 1950s, would this have been the case, even with the large segment of parents and guardians tuning in to his programs along with the youngsters?

Jon Arthur, who settled his family at Fremont, California, was diagnosed with cancer in July 1981. He died at age 63 of a rare cancer of the gall bladder only a few months afterward on February 24, 1982. Although his family was cut from several cloths, “Dad was the connecting glue to us all,” one of his children maintained.⁴¹ The five adult offspring largely “went our own ways” following Big Jon’s passing. But multiple inquiries recently into their father’s career, and the passing of Kathy and Melody’s mother in 2009, have reunited them and precipitated a period of reflection on the “different phases” of their father’s life.

³⁹ Written by John Walter Bratton in 1907 with lyrics added in 1932 by Jimmy Kennedy, “The Teddy Bears’ Picnic” version on Jon Arthur’s programs was performed by organist Ethel Smith.

⁴⁰ Ibid., from a mid 1970s radio interview.

⁴¹ These comments, unless referenced otherwise, are from an e-mail sent to the author by Deborra Goerss Lay on June 9, 2010. Used by permission.

Big Jon's oldest daughter remembers him as "a great dad in every way" and observes that drugs and alcohol "were never part of his life." His youngest daughter labels him "genuine, charismatic, funny, talented, a loving husband and father, brother and son, intelligent, a perfectionist and deeply committed in his faith. He was truly 'a scholar and a gentleman' and a wonderful person to talk to and share ideas with. I could always talk to him about anything and he always had an interesting way of resolving issues and allowing me to think things through for myself.... I never heard him speak ill of anyone but as I look back as an adult I know he dealt with many disappointments.... He was a man of conviction and deep faith and shared it with everyone."

When she was a child, she remembers, "He brought his 'magic' home with him." A lot of grown kids that age probably remember it that way, too.