

Chrysler and “The Major Bowes Amateur Hour” 1936 - 1940

In the mid-1930s, Chrysler had turned to commercial network radio as a cost-effective way to reach an affluent national audience. Late in 1935, the “Major Bowes Amateur Hour” was first aired on the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) radio network and was a runaway success. The show’s host, Edward Bowes, would welcome his amateur guests of all ages but then “gong” those who were inept right in the middle of their performance. In an effort to build up his own struggling network, William S. Paley, the president of the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS), lured Major Bowes to his network in mid-1936, along with the program’s new sponsor, the Chrysler Corporation.

“The Major Bowes Amateur Hour” aired every Thursday evening from 9:00 to 10:00 PM on the CBS radio network. Broadcast live from the CBS Radio Theater in New York City, the program allowed people to vote for their favorite amateur by telephone from the New York City area and from one “honor city” selected each week. Listeners from other parts of the country could vote by telegraph or letter. Winners then had a chance to tour with one of several Major Bowes shows that traveled the country. A broadcast program from June 1937 claimed a national radio audience of 15 to 20 million, and CBS promotional materials from October and November 1941 boasted an audience of 27 million.

This was an early example of the importance of commercial endorsement from a media personality. Major Bowes would personally read the Chrysler advertising copy for each program. The ads might announce new model

introductions or focus on features that enhanced performance, safety or convenience. Often, the ad would promote a single car line, such as Dodge. In its print advertising, Chrysler Corporation reminded readers to tune into the Major Bowes show.

But the ties between Major Bowes and Chrysler went beyond simple sponsorship.

Walter Chrysler and Major Bowes were close friends, and early in the commercial relationship, Chrysler had a 1936 Chrysler Imperial Airflow custom-made for Major Bowes. It featured a body modified by LeBaron and a custom interior with a special console between the driver and passenger compartment. Following Chrysler's death in August 1940, Major Bowes broadcast a personal eulogy on Walter P. Chrysler with the following introduction, "On Sunday last, Walter Chrysler was called home to his eternal rest. For many years he was close to my heart — I loved him as a brother. My personal loss seems irreparable."

Major Bowes was not alone in mourning this man's passing.