

= Flywheel , Shyster , and Flywheel =

Flywheel , Shyster , and Flywheel is a situation comedy radio show starring two of the Marx Brothers , Groucho and Chico , and written primarily by Nat Perrin and Arthur Sheekman . The series was originally broadcast in the United States on the National Broadcasting Company 's Blue Network beginning November 28 , 1932 , and ended May 22 , 1933 . Sponsored by the Standard Oil Companies of New Jersey , Pennsylvania and Louisiana and the Colonial Beacon Oil Company , it was the Monday night installment of the Five @-@ Star Theater , an old @-@ time radio variety series that offered a different program each weeknight . Episodes were broadcast live from NBC 's WJZ station in New York City and later from a sound stage at RKO Pictures in Los Angeles , California , before returning to WJZ for the final episodes .

The program depicts the misadventures of a small law firm , with Groucho as attorney Waldorf T. Flywheel and Chico as Flywheel 's assistant , Emmanuel Ravelli . The series was originally titled Beagle , Shyster , and Beagle , with Groucho 's character named Waldorf T. Beagle , until a lawyer from New York named Beagle contacted NBC and threatened to file a lawsuit unless the name was dropped . Many of the episodes ' plots were drawn from Marx Brothers films .

The show garnered respectable ratings for its early evening time slot although a second season was not produced . It was thought that , like most radio shows of the time , the episodes had not been recorded and the episodes were thought lost until 1988 , when 25 of the 26 scripts were rediscovered in the Library of Congress storage and republished . Adaptations of the recovered scripts were performed and broadcast in the UK on BBC Radio 4 in 1990 . In 1996 , some recordings of the original show were discovered , including a complete recording of the last episode to air .

= = Early development = =

In 1932 Texaco introduced its " Fire Chief " gasoline to the public , so named because its octane rating was 66 , higher than the United States government 's requirements for fire engines . To advertise its new premium grade fuel , Texaco approached vaudeville comic Ed Wynn to star in a radio show titled Fire Chief . Wynn played the fire chief in front of an audience of 700 and the show was aired live over the NBC Red Network , beginning April 24 , 1932 . It immediately proved popular with over two million regular listeners and a Co @-@ Operative Analysis of Broadcasting (CAB) Rating of 44 @. @ 8 % .

Upon seeing the success of Wynn 's Fire Chief , the Standard Oils in New Jersey , Louisiana and Pennsylvania , and Colonial Beacon , decided to sponsor their own radio program to promote Esso Gasoline and Essolube Motor Oil . They turned to the advertising agency McCann Erickson , which developed Five @-@ Star Theater , a variety series that offered a different show each night of the week . Groucho and Chico Marx , one half of the popular vaudeville and film stars the Marx Brothers , were approached to appear in a comedy show . Harpo and Zeppo were not required , as their trademark shticks of mute and straight man did not work well on radio . Before this decision was officially reached , early drafts of the scripts featured guest appearances written for both absent brothers , with Harpo being represented through honks of his horn and other trademark sound effects .

Nat Perrin and Arthur Sheekman , who had contributed to the scripts of the Marx Brothers ' films Monkey Business (1931) and Horse Feathers (1932) , were enlisted to write the comedy show . It was titled Beagle , Shyster , and Beagle , and its premise involved an unethical lawyer / private detective and his bungling assistant .

= = Casting = =

Groucho Marx played Waldorf T. Beagle (later renamed Waldorf T. Flywheel) , and Chico played Emmanuel Ravelli , the same name as the Italian character he played in the film Animal Crackers (1930) . Mary McCoy played secretary Miss Dimple , and it is thought that Broderick Crawford also

appeared as various characters . Groucho and Chico shared a weekly income of \$ 6 @, @ 500 for appearing in the show . During the Great Depression , this was considered a high sum for 30 minutes ' work , especially since radio scripts required no memorization and only a few minutes were needed for costume , hair and makeup . By comparison , Greta Garbo 's weekly salary from Metro @-@ Goldwyn @-@ Mayer during the same period was also \$ 6 @, @ 500 , though this was for a 40- or 50 @-@ hour week . Wynn was paid \$ 5 @, @ 000 a week for Fire Chief . In contrast , almost two @-@ thirds of American families were living on fewer than \$ 26 a week . In a classic Marxian twist , Harpo was paid a weekly salary for not appearing on the show , even though his mute character would have little to do in a radio program anyway .

= = Production = =

Five @-@ Star Theater was broadcast from NBC 's flagship station , WJZ in New York City . Because Groucho , Chico , Perrin , and Sheekman were living and working in Hollywood , they had to make a three @-@ day train journey from Pasadena each week , and then another three @-@ day trip back . The first episode was written as they took their first train ride to New York .

A number of Flywheel , Shyster , and Flywheel 's scripts reused plots from Marx Brothers films . The plot of Episode 17 was suggested by the stolen painting plot in Animal Crackers , though it was a " Beauregard " in the film , not a Rembrandt . The 23rd episode also reused scenes from Animal Crackers , including the stolen diamond plot and Groucho 's lines regarding the need for a seven @-@ cent nickel . Monkey Business influenced two skits in Episode 25 , and The Cocoanuts gave Episode 19 its plot . Many vaudeville acts of the 1920s based their routines on the assumption that all people were straight ; some episodes of Flywheel , Shyster , and Flywheel included relatively low @-@ key homosexual jokes taken from the Marx Brothers ' stage act .

Despite reusing scripts from other sources , Perrin said that he and Sheekman " had [their] hands full turning out a script each week " . They found help from Tom McKnight and George Oppenheimer , whose names were passed along to Groucho . Perrin explained , " [Groucho] was in the men 's room during a break , and he was complaining to the guy standing next to him , ' Geez , I wish we could find another writer or two to make life easier . ' Suddenly there 's a voice from one of the stalls : ' I 've got just the guys for you ! ' Having Tom and George did make life easier , although Arthur and I went over their scripts for a light polishing . "

After traveling to New York to perform the first seven episodes , the four men decided to broadcast from Los Angeles instead . NBC did not have a studio on the West Coast , so for the next thirteen weeks , between January 16 and April 24 , 1933 , the show was transmitted from a borrowed empty soundstage at RKO Radio Pictures . Folding chairs were brought in for the audience of around thirty or forty people ? coming from vaudeville , Groucho and Chico preferred to perform to a crowd ? and were quickly cleared out at the end of each performance so that the stage would be ready for any filming the following day . The last four episodes of the show were performed back at WJZ in New York .

Chico was often late to rehearsals , so Perrin would have to stand in for him on the read @-@ throughs . When Chico eventually made his appearance , Perrin remembers , " he 'd be reading Ravelli 's lines and Groucho would tell him to stop [and make me] ' show him how the line should be read . ' My Italian accent was better than Chico 's , you see . But Chico didn 't care . "

= = Episodes = =

Flywheel , Shyster , and Flywheel aired Monday nights at 7 : 30 p.m. on the NBC Blue Network to thirteen network affiliates in nine Eastern and Southern states . Twenty @-@ six episodes were made , which were broadcast between November 28 , 1932 and May 22 , 1933 . Each episode is introduced by the Blue Network announcer and features about fifteen minutes of drama and ten minutes of orchestral music between acts . The episodes end with Groucho and Chico ? not in character , but as themselves ? performing a 60 @-@ second skit promoting Esso and Essolube .

= = Reception = =

Flywheel , Shyster , and Flywheel was not a success for Standard Oil . Although the successful Marx films Monkey Business and Horse Feathers contained plots involving adultery , Variety did not appreciate them in the radio show :

That 's fine stuff for children ! Chances are that if the Marxes proceed with their law office continuity along lines like this they will never be able to hold a kid listener . Firstly because parents don 't want their children to hear about bad wives and divorces , and this isn 't an agreeable theme to kids . Which means that if the Marxes don 't look out , whatever kid following they have on the screen will be totally lost to them on the air . It 's quite likely the Marxes can make themselves on the air . But they will have to use more headwork than their first effort displayed .

Despite the content , Groucho 's 13 @-@ year @-@ old son Arthur found the show " extremely funny " , albeit conceding that he may have been " a very easy audience " .

Following the airing of the first episodes , a New York attorney named Morris Beagle filed a lawsuit for \$ 300 @,@ 000 alleging his name had been slandered , and that its use was damaging his business and his health . He also claimed that people were calling his law firm and asking , " Is this Mr. Beagle ? " When he answered , " Yes " , the callers would say , " How 's your partner , Shyster ? " and hang up the phone . The sponsors and studio executives panicked , and from episode four the title of the show was changed to " Flywheel , Shyster , and Flywheel " , and Walter T. Beagle was renamed Waldorf T. Flywheel . It was explained in the episode that the character had divorced and reverted to his " maiden name " .

The CAB Rating for the show was 22 @.@ 1 % and placed 12th among the highest rated evening programs of the 1932 ? 33 season . The CAB Rating was not disappointing ? popular established shows such as The Shadow and The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes did not perform as well ? but it was less than half of Texaco 's Fire Chief , which got a 44 @.@ 8 % CAB Rating and was the third highest @-@ rated program of the season . One reason for the lower ratings may be because of the time slot the show aired . In September 1932 , only 40 % of radio owners were listening to the radio at 7 : 00 p.m. , whereas 60 % listened at 9 : 00 p.m. The 1932 ? 1933 season 's top @-@ rated shows , The Chase and Sanborn Hour , Jack Pearl 's Baron Münchhausen , and Fire Chief all aired after 9 : 00 p.m. Standard Oil decided it could not compete with Texaco in the ratings and Five @-@ Star Theater was not renewed for a second season .

In his 1959 autobiography , Groucho and Me , Groucho comments , " We thought we were doing pretty well as comic lawyers , but one day a few Middle East countries decided they wanted a bigger cut of the oil profits , or else . When this news broke , the price of gasoline nervously dropped two cents a gallon , and Chico and I , along with the other shows , were dropped from the network . " In his 1976 book , The Secret Word Is Groucho , he writes , " Company sales , as a result of our show , had risen precipitously . Profits doubled in that brief time , and Esso felt guilty taking the money . So Esso dropped us after twenty @-@ six weeks . Those were the days of guilt @-@ edged securities , which don 't exist today . "

However , the show was later praised by other comedians of the time . In 1988 , Steve Allen said , " when judged in relation to other radio comedy scripts of the early 30s , they hold up very well indeed and are , in fact , superior to the material that was produced for the Eddie Cantor , Rudy Vallee , Joe Penner school . The rapid @-@ fire jokes [...] run the gamut from delightful to embarrassing . " George Burns also found it " funny " . Modern reviews of Flywheel , Shyster , and Flywheel have also been positive . The New York Times ' Herbert Mitgang described it as " one of the funniest [...] radio shows of the early 1930s " , adding that " the radio dialogue was so witty and outrageous , [an] innocent form of original comedy ? as well as serious drama " . Rob White of the British Film Institute said the show " glitter [s] with a thousand @-@ and @-@ one sockeroos . "

= = Rediscovery of the show = =

The episodes of Flywheel , Shyster , and Flywheel were recorded , but for many years it was thought the recordings had not been preserved . At the time of the broadcasts , pre @-@ recorded

shows were frowned upon by advertisers and audiences . However , in 1988 , Michael Barson , who worked in the United States Copyright Office at the Library of Congress discovered that the scripts for twenty @-@ five of the twenty @-@ six episodes had been submitted to the Office , where they had been placed in storage . Nobody was aware that they still existed and their copyrights had not been renewed . This meant that Flywheel , Shyster , and Flywheel had fallen into the public domain . The scripts were published that same year by Pantheon in a book titled Flywheel , Shyster , and Flywheel : The Marx Brothers ' Lost Radio Show , edited by Michael Barson and with an interview with Perrin . In October 1988 , Flywheel , Shyster and Flywheel scenes were broadcast for the first time since the show went off the air in 1933 when National Public Radio , a non @-@ profit media organization that provides content to public radio stations around the United States , aired an 18 @-@ minute recreation of Flywheel , Shyster and Flywheel in markets such as Chicago , Illinois , Dallas , Texas , and Los Angeles , California , using Washington , D.C.-based Arena Stage actors to perform the Chico and Groucho lead roles from the published scripts . Years later , three recordings of Flywheel , Shyster , and Flywheel were found , including a five @-@ minute excerpt of Episode 24 and a fifteen @-@ minute recording of Episode 25 . A complete recording of Episode 26 exists and was broadcast on BBC Radio 4 in 2005 .

= = BBC Radio adaptation = =

In 1990 the British Broadcasting Corporation 's Radio 4 aired a version of Flywheel , Shyster , and Flywheel . Michael Roberts and Frank Lazarus performed the lead roles of Flywheel and Ravelli , wearing make @-@ up and clothing similar to Groucho and Chico . The cast also included Lorelei King in all the female roles and guest @-@ starred Spike Milligan and Dick Vosburgh . The scripts for the BBC series were adapted for a modern British audience by Mark Brisenden and were produced and directed by Dirk Maggs . Each episode incorporated material from two or three different original episodes , and occasionally included additional jokes from Marx Brothers ' films .

Commenting on the series , Maggs has said it was his favorite among the comedies he had directed , and described how they were performed .

The great thing about audience shows is doing the effects live on stage . BBC Radio Light Entertainment tended to have the effects operator hidden away behind curtains so they wouldn 't distract the audience ! A few Light Entertainment Producers like me have reasoned over the years that the spot effects are part of the entertainment so we brought the operator out front . And in the case of Flywheel we dressed him or her up as Harpo ! Michael Roberts who played Groucho came out with such good ad libs that I was always happy to cut scripted gags to keep them . One great one was when he and Frank as Flywheel and Ravelli find themselves in a pigsty ? the rest of the cast pushed in to make pig voices ? and Mike ad libbed , " Imagine ? two nice Jewish boys surrounded by ham " ? it brought the house down .

Six episodes were performed and recorded at the Paris Theatre and aired weekly between June 2 and July 7 , 1990 . The success of the first series led to another two being commissioned . The second series aired from May 11 to June 15 , 1991 , and the third from July 11 to August 15 , 1992 . The first series was made available by BBC Enterprises on a two @-@ cassette release in 1991 , but the second and third series were not .