

AUDIOBOOK REPORT

Radio days

The best and brightest of the 20th Century are brought together

By MICHAEL GILTZ

"The 60 Greatest Old-Time Radio Shows of the 20th Century," selected by Walter Cronkite. (Radio Spirits; unabridged; 20 cassettes, 30 hours, \$90.)

The title of this impressive collection is no exaggeration. Anyone who loves audiobooks, classic radio shows or simply faces a long trip in the car will undoubtedly find this compilation to be the "greatest."

Selected by Walter Cronkite, this boxed set has virtually every important radio show you can name. Orson Welles' "War of the Worlds"? It's here. Abbott and Costello's "Who's On First?" Here. Burns and Allen, Jack Benny, Edgar Bergen & Charlie McCarthy, Mae West and "Dragnet"? All here — and the sound quality is impressive throughout.

These aren't snippets, either. They're complete radio broadcasts, including commercials. Hearing ads touting the pleasures of smoking ("Lucky Strike means fine tobacco") and listening to hosts shill for their sponsors is almost as entertaining as the shows themselves.

A few entries show their age — such as a hokey, sentimental episode of "Grand Central Station," in which God helps a cynical ambulance driver learn the true meaning of Christmas. But most of the writing is surprisingly modern. Whether it's the sharp-tongued feuding of "The Bickersons" (starring Don Ameche) or the trading of quips on "The Chase and Sanborn Hour" (with Edgar Bergen and his dummy, Charlie McCarthy) the jokes are as

sophisticated and fresh as any recent episode of "Frasier" or "Friends."

The collection also includes a radio-only Bob Hope and Bing Crosby special called "Road to Hollywood" and an all-star "Dick Tracy" episode with Hope and Crosby, Frank Sinatra and Jimmy Durante, among others.

But perhaps the best part of these tapes are the handful of rare broadcasts penned by the one of radio's purest talents: Norman Corwin.

The prodigious writer and director was a jewel in CBS' crown for many years. His shows were carried with out commercials — pure prestige items that garnered critical acclaim and, at times, a massive following.

When victory was imminent during World War II, it was Corwin who wrote the stirring "On a Note of Triumph" — a brilliant reminder of why we were fighting, what we were fighting for and who we were fighting against. With poetic license,

Corwin fictionalized interviews with an unrepentant Nazi (he was just following orders), letters from refugees who fled their homelands in distress and glimpses of the sacrifices that were made on the home front.

To celebrate the Bill of Rights, CBS also turned to Corwin, who lined up an all-star cast, headlined by Jimmy Stewart. Corwin's more whimsical side surfaces on a show called "The Undecided Molecule," a mock trial presided over by Groucho Marx.

The three hours of Corwin's terrific work is just a small portion of the many little-known pleasures you can find in this peerless collection.

