



# Inventing Late Night: Steve Allen And the Original Tonight Show

*Ben Alba*

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"If you have ever turned on the TV after the 11 o'clock news and laughed, you owe Steve Allen a debt of gratitude." That's how Entertainment Weekly described Steve Allen's enormous contribution to American popular culture in a tribute to the legendary entertainer after his death on October 30, 2000. Steve Allen created the Tonight show — America's longest running entertainment show and most successful late-night TV show. In so doing he led the way for other American icons: Johnny Carson, Jack Paar, David Letterman, and Jay Leno. The formula we all now take for granted did not exist before Allen: the desk, the opening monologue, breezy chats with celebrities, wacky stunts, comedy sketches, cameras roaming down the hall and outside the theater, off-the-cuff interviews with passers-by, and ad-lib banter with the studio audience. It's all great fun and it's all due to the incredibly witty, incurably silly, musically gifted, and ever-likeable Steve Allen.

Based on exclusive interviews, Ben Alba has produced this wonderful history of the first Tonight show, complete with terrific photos from the show and revealing insights from over 30 entertainment legends who knew and worked with Steve Allen — including Sid Caesar, Carl Reiner, Jonathan Winters, Don Knotts, Louis Nye, Tom Poston, Bill Dana, Steve Lawrence and Eydie Gorme, Andy Williams, Tim Conway, the Smothers Brothers, Diahann Carroll, Eartha Kitt, Bill Dana, and Doc Severinsen. In addition, Jay Leno, David Letterman, Bill Maher, Bob Costas, and other TV veterans reflect on Allen's contributions. Starting with Allen's early career in radio, Alba shows how the young radio talent developed many of the elements that would soon light up late-night television. He then highlights Allen's many innovations that made the Tonight show so appealing and enduring: the single-guest and single theme shows, road shows and live segments from across the country, Broadway shows visiting Tonight, creating a forum for jazz artistry and a groundbreaking showcase for African-American talent, musical tributes, and the use of the studio audience as a comedy goldmine.

Alba has created an invaluable, entertaining, and revealing behind-the-scenes look at the birth of an American television institution and its brilliant inventor, whose influence continues to make America stay awake and laugh —night after night.

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