

HOME ENTERTAINMENT

MUSIC, VIDEOS AND NEW IDEAS FOR THE HOME

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The famous faces
who helped in warBy Andy Wickstrom
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When Americans speak of World War II as "the last good war," when global issues could still be cast in terms of good versus evil, they could just as well be referring to the sacrifices and dedication of the entertainment community.

From selling war bonds to making personal visits to hospitals and combat zones, the most popular stage, screen and radio personalities of the 1940s did their utmost to boost military morale. The story of their contribution to the war effort is compellingly told in *Entertaining the Troops* (90 minutes, \$29.95), released late last year by SVS Inc.

Produced, directed and written by Robert Mugge, *Entertaining the Troops* scores not only as vividly told history, but also as entertainment unto itself. The talents of a Danny Kaye, a Bob Hope or a Jerry Colonna are just as impressive to audiences today as when these celebrities were at the peak of their popularity.

The parade of famous faces seems endless. Some of Hollywood's biggest stars — Clark Gable, Jimmy Stewart — are glimpsed in uniform, ready to put their careers on hold while they fulfill their patriotic duty. Others — including Dorothy Lamour, James Cagney and even Bugs Bunny — are seen in promotional short subjects reminding Americans to observe rationing and buy more bonds.

Lamour, who became known as the "Bond Bombshell" for her tireless campaigns for war bonds (she's attributed with personally raising \$300 million in sales), is one of several celebrities to appear in new interview footage for this program. Admirers of the old Hollywood and nostalgia buffs of the '40s will enjoy her reminiscences, along with those of Maxene Andrews of the Andrews Sisters, Mel Blanc (the voice behind Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck and a hundred other Warner Bros. cartoons) and singer Frances Langford.

Two institutions of the era that attracted widespread support among entertainers were the Hollywood Canteen and Armed Forces Radio.

At the Canteen, big-name stars mingled with ordinary G.I.'s, and young men who were preparing to ship out to various fronts around the world left with glamorous memories of meeting Hedy Lamarr, Marlene Dietrich, Lana Turner and Dinah Shore. Also seen there in a Canteen promotional reel are Red Skelton, Xavier Cugat, Jimmy Durante and Eddie Cantor.

For those soldiers already at the front, Armed Forces Radio was the primary means of entertainment, and the most popular programs were such shows as *Mail Call*, *Command Performance* and *Jubilee*. Segments of each are seen here in filmed promotional shorts, one containing a terrific comic duet between Lena Horne and Eddie "Rochester" Anderson, and another offering Abbott & Costello's classic "Who's on First" routine.

Almost all this old black-and-white footage is in first-rate condition, and consequently *Entertaining the Troops* is as technically proficient as a good feature film.

Saving the best for last, Mugge presents in the last half hour a recent informal reunion of Bob Hope, Frances Langford, dancer Patty Thomas and musician Tony Romano, who (with Colonna) formed the core of Hope's legendary touring troupe.

As the old chums gather around a patio table and kid each other with wartime recollections (Hope remembers bouts with fungus), we watch extended scenes of their performances, off-stage clowning and hospital tours in Europe, the South Pacific and North Africa. It's a stirring look at Hope in his heyday, and a reminder that he is the consummate entertainer. The men in the trenches of World War II knew that, and this tape will help ensure that the rest of us never forget.