



MARTIANS ARE COMING!, THE: The True Story of Orson Welles' 1938 Panic Broadcast

Alan Gallop

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It was Halloween 1938 when twenty-three-year-old Orson Welles fooled America into thinking it had been invaded by aliens.

The Mercury Theatre on the Air production of H. G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds* has become one of the most talked-about broadcasts in the history of the radio. It resulted in mass panic across America. People ran into the streets screaming that the world was ending. Churches were emptied of their congregations, cinemas of their audiences, restaurants of their patrons. Panic-stricken families rushed to their cars and drove like lunatics in a bid to escape Martian annihilation.

The Martians Are Coming! is the story of how the play came to be written, cast, rehearsed and broadcast to a credulous nation. Even Hitler, Goebbels and Mussolini had something to say about it.

The book turns the spotlight on a young genius who by the age of twenty had already conquered Broadway. Welles was soon handed a weekly radio show in which he could put on anything he pleased, providing it entertained American listeners. Soon he was on a train to Hollywood and stardom as a actor-director to set about creating *Citizen Kane*.

Set against the background of America's economic depression and rumbles of another world war coming from across the Atlantic, the book sets the historic broadcast in the context of how Americans were thinking and feeling on the night their world almost - but not quite - came to an end.

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