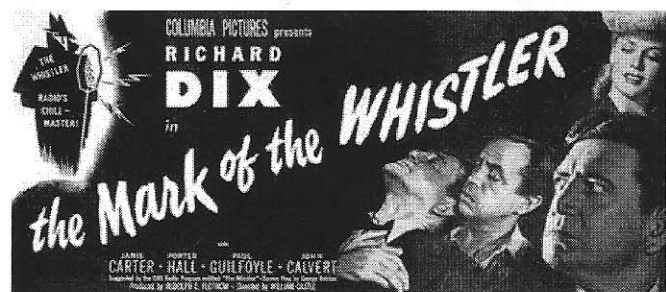


Nameless Terrors Exploring the Dark Side with *The Whistler*

By Elizabeth McLeod



Nothing is more frightening than the dark side of the human psyche.

And on that simple truth was built one of radio's most memorable programs.

"The Whistler" is better known today among Old Time Radio fans than it ever was during the era of its original broadcast. For most of its run, the series was purely a West Coast feature, its audience confined to the marketing area served by its sponsor, the Signal Oil Company. While the show attracted a cult following in the west, attempts to bring the show to a national audience achieved only middling success -- and so it was that most Americans living during the OTR period never heard the show.

But even without a national audience, "The Whistler" achieved a remarkably consistent level of quality -- and while it never had the big-name star power of such shows as "Suspense," it didn't really need the big stars, not with its stock company of first-class working radio actors. Such performers as Frank Lovejoy, Jeanette Nolan, Elliot Lewis, Lurene Tuttle, Wally Maher, Betty Lou Gerson and dozens of others --the cream of Hollywood AFRA -- brought "The Whistler's" tight little morality plays to life each week, plays set in a world in which all that separated an ordinary citizen from the electric chair was the slightest little twist of fate.

The typical "Whistler" plot involves a rather faceless white-collar American. Male, fortyish, trapped in a go-nowhere job with an ungrateful boss. He's probably married, and chances are his wife is either a cold-blooded social climber or a sharp-tongued harridan. Whatever the specifics, his life has ground along in this rut year after year, wearing away his very soul -- until one day he has the opportunity to 1) kill his boss or his wife -- or both -- or 2) make an enormous sum of money by

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committing just one little crime. The dark vision of this series being what it is, Our Hero will wrestle with his conscience and finally do the deed -- only to overlook the one little detail that will bring his world crashing down. (One could draw some interesting psychological conclusions from "The Whistler" about how the Post War Man, deep down, viewed his life -- but then, it's only a radio show, right?)

The cleverness of "The Whistler" is the way in which this standard plot could be reworked -- there are dozens of variations, and while the twist endings are sometimes obvious, more often they genuinely take you by surprise. You listen to each episode knowing the protagonist is going to be foiled by Fate -- the only question is how will it happen," and the ingenuity with which the plots are developed reflects well on the writers, and on the overall vision of producer George W. Allen.

The Whistler himself is an essential part of the package. Although several actors played the part, only Bill Forman really captured the sneering malevolence of the character -- an omniscient narrator who seems to be the living vocalization of a guilty conscience. Adding to the ominous atmosphere of the series are the musical scores by Wilbur Hatch -- heavy with flutes, the music meshes perfectly with the action, helping to build the tension right up to the crashing finish of each episode.

I'm not going to elaborate on specific episodes here -- far be it from me to spoil any endings! Suffice it to say that the show was at its peak from about 1945 thru 1949 -- and just about any episode from this part of the run will satisfy. "The Whistler" is a show that's best enjoyed in isolated segments -- listening to too many episodes at a sitting can be exhausting, and can also draw too much attention to the formula aspects of the scripts. Listen at night, by all means - but not just before going to sleep!

Elizabeth McLeod is a journalist, researcher, and freelance writer specializing in radio of the 1930s. She is a regular contributor to "Nostalgia Digest" magazine and the Internet OldRadio Mailing List, maintains a website, Broadcasting History Resources, and is presently researching a book on Depression-era broadcasting. Elizabeth is always looking for 1930s radio recordings in all formats -- uncoated aluminum or lacquer-coated discs, vinyl or shellac pressings, or low generation tape copies. You can contact her at lizmcl@midcoast.com