



**Radio's Experimental Laboratory:  
The Columbia Workshop**

By Elizabeth McLeod

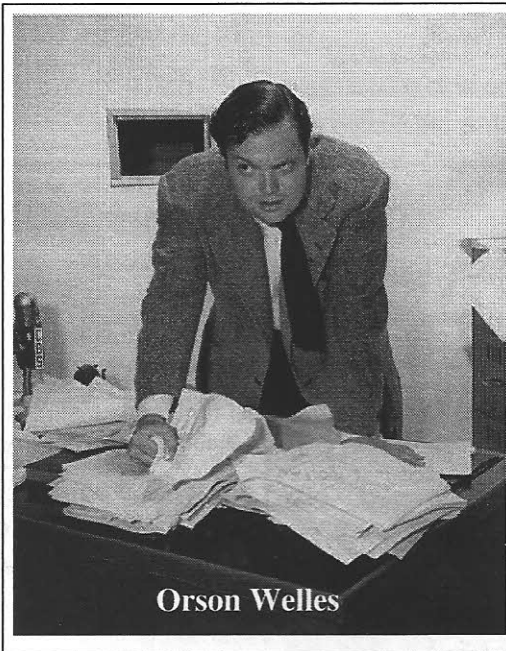
It wasn't the only venue for experimental drama. It's wasn't even the first.

As far back as 1929, NBC's Radio Guild had been blazing new trails from its obscure afternoon time slot. And in 1930, CBS gave actress Georgia Backus an eight-week series to try out new ideas in dramatic technique. And, of course, beginning in 1934, Wyllis Cooper was exploring the dark side of radio drama from Chicago, with his legendary "Lights Out."

But beginning in 1936, "The Columbia Workshop" was clearly in the forefront of dramatic innovation -- helping to steer the still-youthful form away from Broadway sketches and toward a style and technique all its own.

It never had a sponsor, and it never made any money. But it got good publicity for CBS, and made network president William Paley look like a "patron of the arts." And for Paley, always striving for acceptance in high-flown WASP social circles, that was enough. From 1936 until 1942, and again in 1946-47, the Columbia Workshop was the most original, most innovative program on the air.

The earliest "Workshop" shows are also the most overtly experimental -- the show featured engineering demonstrations almost as often as it did dramas during its first several weeks on the air. But mixed in with the technical talk were some of the most remarkable dramatic pieces to have been heard on the air up to that time -- pieces which can still fascinate even today. The second show of the series, on 7/25/36, presented "Broadway Evening," an almost hallucinogenic exploration of sound technique in which the listener simply takes a stroll down the Main Stem. There's no plot to speak of -- it's essentially a mood piece, a picture painted entirely through sound effects and overheard snatches of random dialogue. It was breathtaking in 1936 -- and it remains so today.



Orson Welles

Just as remarkable is Vic Knight's "Cartwheel," heard on 8/1/36. Compressing fifty years into fifteen minutes, the piece tells the story of a US Mint employee who has spent a lifetime searching for a rare silver dollar -- but the story isn't really told from his point of view. Instead, you hear the \*coin's\* experiences, following the dollar as it travels from pocket to purse, in a series of lightning-fast transitions. It's an

exhilarating experiment in audio montage -- and it's also an excellent story, with an O. Henry-like twist at the end. (Continued on Page 5)

**(The Columbia Workshop, Cont. from Page 1)**

The Workshop was also notable in its earliest days for taking listeners behind the scenes, and showing just how radio drama was done. The technical demonstrations accomplished that to a degree, but there were also fully dramatized peeks into the control room. "The San Quentin Prison Break" (9/5/36) isn't really about a prison break at all -- instead, the program follows "Calling All Cars" producer William N. Robson as he rushes to assemble a spot-news dramatic recreation of the escape, to be aired less than three hours after the story broke. It's an effective, true-to-life look at just how spontaneous radio could be.

The early fascination with experimentation gave way over the first couple of years of the Workshop's run to a more self-consciously artistic approach, and some of the top young talents in the field were drawn to the show. The Workshop offers some of the earliest important work of Orson Welles -- who, at the age of twenty-one, took over the Workshop's facilities for an impressive two-part adaptation of "Hamlet" (9/19/36 and 11/14/36). Welles participated in a number of Workshop programs during 1936-38 -- including the most famous show the series ever did: Archibald MacLeish's "Fall Of The City."

Heard on 4/11/37, "Fall Of The City" is a disturbing allegory about the dark side of human nature, overlaid with not-so-subtle commentary on the then-current international political scene. It was by far the most ambitious production ever mounted by the Workshop -- so big, in fact, that no studio at CBS could hold it. Four directors, an army of technicians, and a cast of two hundred had to move en masse to a New York National Guard armory in order to make the show happen. "Fall" created a sensation on its original airing -- although the listening audience for the Workshop was statistically negligible, among those few who did listen were a number of notable critics, who gave the production glowing notices. Today, "Fall" is still an impressive production -- but it also seems oddly dated. MacLeish's script is written in the florid technique typical of 1930s "message theatre," and comes across as both purple and pompous to modern ears. While it's a landmark production in the history of radio drama -- it really isn't the best show by which to judge the entire series. "Fall Of The City" was, indeed, far from a typical example of "Workshop" drama. Indeed, by the end of the 1930s, the show

had become less a venue for elaborate "experimental" productions than a showcase for genuinely creative scripting.

At its best, the Workshop was a writer's show, featuring original pieces by a broad range of authors -- from Stephen Vincent Benet to unknown college students -- the only requirement being that the scripts be \*good.\* Quite the most effective "Workshop" shows are the understated "slice of life" stories -- these never got the publicity of the Important Artistic Productions, but they were usually far more entertaining. The widely-available "Now It's Summer" (9/21/39) is a delightful, delicate glimpse of a warm afternoon, as seen thru the eyes of a small boy, perfectly captured by author Arthur Koeber. It's a perfect balance of experimental technique and quality scripting -- and shows what the Workshop could do when it kept its feet on the ground.

My personal favorite of the Workshop's productions is somewhat atypical. You don't often think of the Workshop as a venue for comedy, but "Out Of The Air" (3/23/41) is genuinely hilarious from start to finish. This unjustly-forgotten story by James and Elizabeth Hart, adapted from an idea by Tommy White, tells the tale of a second-rate vaudeville comedian with a photographic memory who briefly attains fame and fortune as a professional quiz show contestant. The script manages by turns to be both funny and poignant in its depiction of the comic's rise and fall, and becomes an utter riot in its razor-edged lampooning of several popular quiz shows of the day. "Out Of The Air" is the antithesis of what we usually think of as a "Workshop" presentation -- it uses no music, and few sound effects -- and this minimalist production forces the script to stand on its own merits. It's the ultimate challenge for a writer to be able to pull off a show under such restrictions -- and the Harts succeed admirably. This is an outstanding piece of radio -- and just one of the many gems which can be found over the course of the Workshop's run.

The Columbia Workshop doesn't seem to generate a lot of interest in mainstream OTR circles -- perhaps some are put off by its "intellectual" pretensions, or its constant genre-hopping. It's also a hard show to find -- it's never generated much commercial-reissue interest, and many of the surviving episodes cry out for a proper remastering. But if you really want to hear what radio can do --

without the restrictions of sponsor censorship, without forced adherence to formula -- you owe it to yourself to give the Workshop a try.

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## Some Suggestions for Christmas Listening . . .

*In the fall of 2001, RWUN held a contest to discover RHAC members' all-time favorite Christmas OTR shows. Your editor thought that this reprinting of the contest results might provide some ideas for your Christmas OTR listening.*

**Here are the top ten OTR Christmas Shows as voted by RHAC members:**

### Place

- 1<sup>st</sup> Campbell Playhouse "A Christmas Carol"
- 2<sup>nd</sup> (Tie) Amos 'N' Andy "The Lord's Prayer"
- 2<sup>nd</sup> (Tie) Screen Directors' Playhouse "Miracle on 34th Street"
- 4<sup>th</sup> Family Theater "The Littlest Angel"
- 5<sup>th</sup> Amos 'N' Andy "Andy Plays Santa"
- 6<sup>th</sup> Bing Crosby "Annual Christmas Show"
- 7<sup>th</sup> Grand Central Station "The Ambulance"
- 8<sup>th</sup> Red Skelton "The Little Christmas Tree"
- 9<sup>th</sup> Damon Runyon Theater "Dancing Dan's Christmas"
- 10<sup>th</sup> Ozzie & Harriet "A Sensible Christmas"

### SPECIAL MENTION:

- Cavalcade of America "A Child is Born"  
Family Theater "Lullaby to Christmas"  
Fibber McGee and Molly "Figuring the Costs of Gifts"  
Fibber McGee and Molly "Fixing Toys for Needy Kids"  
Jack Benny Program "Any Christmas Show"

**RETURN WITH US NOW...**

- Let's Pretend "The Night Before Christmas"  
Our Miss Brooks "Connie's Christmas" (Magic Tree)  
Roy Rogers "Christmas Misunderstanding"  
Suspense "Back for Christmas"  
The Cinnamon Bear

### HONORABLE MENTION:

- Archie Andrews "Christmas Shopping"  
Broadway is My Beat "Nick Norman, Santa Claus"  
Cavalcade of America "The Day They Gave Babies Away"  
Cavalcade of America "The Names on the Land"  
Duffy's Tavern "Miracle in Manhattan"  
Family Theater "Blessed are They" (Father Christmas)  
Family Theater "The Juggler of Our Lady"  
Family Theater "The Nativity"  
Great Gildersleeve "Any Christmas Episode"  
Gunsmoke "Beaker's Barn"  
Gunsmoke "Feud"  
Mysterious Traveler "Christmas Story"  
Phil Harris/Alice Faye "Santa's Visit"  
Richard Diamond, Private Detective "A Gumshoe's Christmas Carol"  
Romance "Richer by One Christmas"  
The Life of Riley "A Christmas Tale"  
This is My Best "The Plot to Overthrow Christmas"  
This is Your FBI "The Innocent Santa"  
Yours Truly, Johnny Dollar "Dancing Mouse Matter"  
Yours Truly, Johnny Dollar "The Nick Schoen Matter"

*If you have any favorite OTR Christmas shows not mentioned above, please send or E-Mail the information to RWUN so that they may be included in future Listening Suggestions lists.*



### NEW IN THE TAPE LIBRARY

**by Dick and Maletha King**

Just a short note this month to let you know that a new set of BBC productions have been added to the library. These consists of modern espionage and sci-fi thrillers. We follow this with additional WWII era episodes of "Fibber McGee and Molly" shows.

You'll notice that we've included a RHAC membership form as this month's insert page. Consider giving a club membership to your friends and relatives. It's the gift that keeps on giving.

**Merry Christmas to you all!**

*December, 2004*