



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

By Elizabeth McLeod

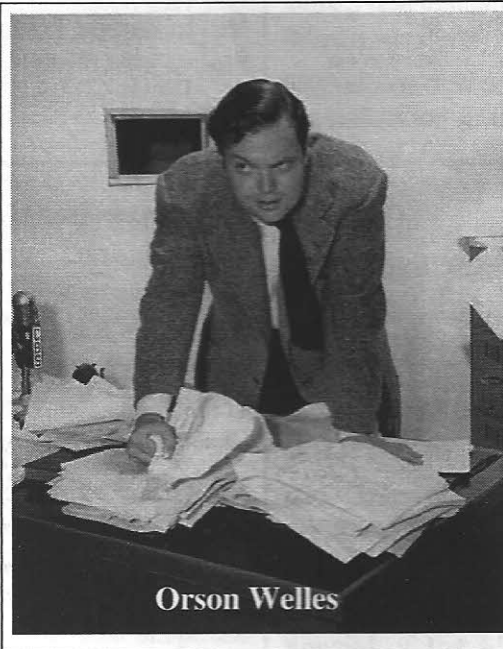
It wasn't the only venue for experimental drama. It's wasn't even the first.

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)

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LIBRARIES

Reference Material:	Bill McCracken	7101 W. Yale Ave. #503	Denver, CO 80227	(303) 986-9863
Logs & Scripts:	Fred Hinz	c/o RHAC PO Box 1908	Englewood, CO 80150	
Open Reel Tape:	Maletha King	900 W. Quincy Ave.	Englewood, CO 80110	
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#1 (1-499)	David Gatch	PO Box 70	Glen Haven, CO 80532	(970) 577-0805
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CD Library:	Thomas Woessner	3240 S. Lowell Bld.	Denver, CO 80236	(303) 936-4643

Convention Schedules

19th Annual OTR and Nostalgia Convention, April 15 - 16, 2005; Contact Bob Burchett, 10280 Gunpowder Rd., Florence, KY 41042. (859) 282-0333 or haradio@hotmail.com

30th Friends of Old-time Radio Convention, Oct 20 - 23, 2005 at the Holiday Inn, Newark, NJ; For information contact Jay Hickerson, Box 4321, Hamden, CT 06514 (203) 248-2887 JayHick@aol.com, or check our web site: <http://www.fotr.net>

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THE CASE OF MARTIN DURKIN

By Martin Grams, Jr.

On August 25, 1937, *Gang Busters* presented "The Case of Martin Durkin," which caused a storm of legal complications for Phillips H. Lord. Dramatized on *G-Men* two years earlier, this script involved F.B.I. agent Edwin C. Shanahan, who had been assigned by J. Edgar Hoover to break up a stolen auto racket run by Martin Durkin, well-known Midwestern operator. Durkin had a quick trigger finger, having wounded three policemen in Chicago and one in California. Without success, Shanahan had canvassed all agencies, garages and repair shops in Chicago where Durkin was believed to be centering his activities. Then he was notified that Durkin had been in a certain garage. Shanahan followed the tip and a group of Chicago policemen stationed themselves in the garage and waited. Hours passed. The police left and promised to send another shift to replace them. Shanahan was alone when Durkin pulled in. He leveled his gun and demanded that Durkin surrender. Pretending to open the door, Durkin reached instead for his gun and shot the G-Man point blank. Then he gunned the car and backed out of the garage, as the dying officer fired shots after him.

From that moment every resource of all the law enforcement agencies in the country was directed at Durkin. The G-Man knew that Durkin's two weaknesses were money and women. They questioned Durkin's attractive girlfriend Betty Werner, who lived with her uncle Lloyd Austin. She said she never heard from him, but later her uncle told the police secretly that Durkin was going to visit her that evening. The police and federal authorities planned a trap for him. Officers were stationed at various points in the house. Sergeant Gray, the ace marksman of the Chicago police was stationed at the back door with a sawed-off shot gun. The suspense was not prolonged. A car stopped at the back gate and Durkin climbed the steps. His girlfriend was about to shout out a warning when Grey stood and

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SA Edwin C. Shanahan

opened fire as Durkin reached the top step. The wily Durkin, however, had worn a bullet proof vest and the shot did no harm. He pulled his gun and shot Sergeant Gray. In the resulting confusion, the girl's uncle was caught in the police crossfire and killed. Durkin made good his escape with only a flesh wound.

After this incident, Hoover told his men that Durkin must be taken at all costs, dead or alive. His description and fingerprints were given the widest circulation possible. Hoover felt that his need for money would lead him back into the car racket and Durkin had a penchant for stealing expensive Cadillacs, Packards and Pierce Arrows. He would walk into a showroom and demand a certain car be delivered to him early the following morning, serviced with gas and oil, for which he would pay cash on delivery. That night he would steal the serviced car and depart. Then he would change the license plate and sell it in another state.

On January 10, 1926, the Los Angeles office of the F.B.I. was notified that a new phaeton, with brown top, green body and red wooden wheels had been stolen.

On Sunday, January 17, a sheriff in the little Texas town of Pecos saw a phaeton parked in front of a store. He looked inside and saw a new .44 Winchester rifle on the floor. When a breezy young man and girl came out of the store he inquired about the rifle. The man claimed to be Fred Conley, deputy sheriff of Los Angeles County, and introduced his "wife." He said they were going hunting and asked the sheriff for some help. When the Sheriff said he would like to see their identification papers, the couple returned to their hotel to get them and promised to come right back. Naturally, they did not. The rather naïve Sheriff reported the incident to the El Paso office of the F.B.I. The hunt was intensified in the rugged section known as the "Big Bend of the Rio Grande." Two days later they found the car, disabled in a clump of mesquite. They learned the couple had traveled to Alpine, 150 miles to the south, by train. In Alpine, they had taken the Texas Special of the Missouri, Kansas and Texas R.R. to St. Louis at 11 a.m. that day.

At 9:30 a.m. on January 20, 1926, a group of heavily armed agents in plain clothes met the train at the station before St. Louis. Passengers were alarmed as grim-faced men paraded down the length of the third car and pulled guns before a compartment. The passengers were herded out. A G-Man knocked on the door and Durkin answered. They grappled with him and prevented him from reaching his gun. He and his 18-year-old bride of two weeks were captured.

Five days after the *Gang Busters* presentation of "The Case of Martin Durkin" was broadcast, the following appeared in the August 23, 1937 issue of *Time Magazine*:

"Every week since January 1936 Colgate-Palmolive-Peet Co. has been advertising Palmolive shaving creams with a Wednesday night coast-to-coast radio melodrama entitled *Gang-busters*. Produced by smart young Benton & Bowles advertising agency, which claims 20,000,000 listeners for the program, *Gang-busters* dramatizes actual criminal careers. The killing of Dillinger gangster Homer Van Meter was the subject of one hair-raising episode. But *Gang-busters* has not confined itself to dead law-breakers. The dramatization of the capture of Massachusetts' murdering Millen Brothers was broadcast prior to their electrocution and many a live but lesser robber, forger and gangster has had his story told. Until last week there had never been a squawk from the criminal.

"Last week dapper little Martin J. 'Marty' Durkin, known in his gunning heyday as 'The Sheik' and now in his twelfth year of a 35-year term in Joliet (Ill.) Penitentiary for killing a Federal Agent in Chicago in 1925, was announced as the principal character in the *Gang-busters* weekly dramatization. 'They've got no right to use my misfortune to peddle soap,' said Lawyer Irving S. Roth for convict Durkin, eligible for parole in seven more months. Into court at Chicago marched Mr. Roth, seeking an injunction against the broadcast. Surprised, Benton & Bowles quickly dropped Durkin's tale, instead told one about a rich New Yorker named Shattuck who pursued a thieving butler across the ocean, caught him in France and had him sent to Devil's Island.

"Everybody knows that no criminal has any legal protection against the publication of the facts of his conviction. Murderer Durkin's chief hope for an injunction was therefore based on an unusual Illinois

statute which makes it unlawful to exhibit for pecuniary gain criminal or deformed persons. Federal Judge J. Leroy Adair pondered, decided 'exhibiting' meant displaying the person as on a vaudeville stage, refused the injunction. Benton & Bowles's Manhattan publicity department shot out an exultant news release claiming 'freedom of speech in commercial broadcasting was upheld for the first time in radio history.' Promptly Murderer Durkin's biography was announced for the *Gang-busters* show this week."

Durkin escaped the chair by convincing a jury that he had thought Shanahan was a hijacker. Durkin had indeed gone to court in 1937 to prevent his case from being broadcast, and lost.

Martin Grams, Jr. is the author of numerous books about old-time radio and the following above contains excerpts from his latest book, Gang Busters: The Crime Fighters of American Broadcasting, © 2004, Martin Grams, Jr., reprinted with permission.

From the Desk of
the Editor
by Carol Tiffany



It is hard to believe that this is our last issue of RWUN for 2004. It has been a very eventful year and one many of us will never forget. I hope that all of you have had a wonderful Thanksgiving and will be experiencing a joyous Christmas Season.

While we are still dealing with damage from our "season of storms" here in the Plywood State, we are also getting ready for the Holidays. As always, your editor wraps presents and "decks the halls" to the sound of the great old OTR Christmas shows. We have included in this issue a list of some of the best of these for your suggested holiday listening.

We have received several suggestions from readers that we add a "**Letters to the Editor**" column to the newsletter. I would appreciate some more feedback on this issue from our members. Would you like to have such a forum in our newsletter?

As the year ends, I want to thank all of the talented authors and contributors without whose efforts we would not enjoy such a diverse and interesting newsletter. Kudos also to Larry Weide, whose quiet work in setting up and getting the newsletter to the printer is invaluable.

Merry Christmas and good listening to all...

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(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.

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

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

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

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- 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 Malettha 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!