



RETURN WITH US NOW...

RADIO HISTORICAL
ASSOCIATION OF
COLORADO

Volume 38, Number 6

MEMBERSHIP RENEWAL FORM INSIDE

November/December, 2013

OTR WITHOUT WORDS

Old Time Radio enthusiasts are well aware that listeners can create pictures in their own “Theater of the Mind” without the need of that device that flies those images through the air--known as television.

Today, recorded music in various formats is abundant through traditional broadcast services and through satellite transmission. And a good share of sound generated through contemporary radio originates through the human voice, especially because “talk radio” has become a staple of the daily offerings along the dial. Listeners can hear news, political talk, sports talk, specialty talk shows on gardening, health, food and restaurants, cars, finances and investing, and virtually every topic imaginable.

What is not heard much anymore is talk consisting of dialogue on carefully scripted, rehearsed and professionally presented dramatic, comedy, adventure and variety shows such as aired on Old Time Radio.

Voices of the great OTR performances were paramount, of course. But they were not always needed to successfully tell a story or convey a thought. Sound effects and live music added greatly to the production values and audience reaction. Examples are plentiful.

Would Fibber McGee and Molly be as memorable today without the periodic visit by Fibber to fetch something from the hall closet as Molly begs him not to because of all the junk piled in there? No sir. Naturally, McGee goes right head and opens the door.

The audience hears the crash of the accumulated discards. Sound effects man Monty Fraser had spent hours scouring the NBC prop room to find and arrange just the right kind and amount of junk Fibber may have tossed in the closet. Among the actual items used for the hilarious audio effect: a bowling pin, an old alarm clock, a pair of shoes, a broken table lamp, and a single roller skate.



Fraser carefully arranged them. On cue, the props cascaded to the floor below, the audience howling with laughter. Then, just as the laughter began to die out, the *piece de resistance*, the icing on the auditory cake, a slight pause and then the sound of what Robert L. Mott, author of the book *Radio Sound Effects* called “the sound of a plucky, precocious little tiny tinkly bell.” The Fibber studio audience erupted again in gales of additional laughter that took some thirty seconds to subside. No “canned” laughter such as used on some TV sitcoms today.

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RADIO HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION OF COLORADO

PO BOX 1908, Englewood CO 80150

Dedicated to the preservation of old-time radio programs, and to making those programs available to our members

Hear RHAC on the web, 4th Sunday of every month, at 8:30pm Mountain time at;
"OTR From The Rockies" - <http://www.yesterdayusa.com/saturdaylive.htm>

RHAC Web Site - <http://www.rhac.org>

RHAC Email - info@rhac.org

Old-Time Radio is Alive and Well in Colorado!

KEZW 1430 AM "When Radio Was" (Denver) Weekdays, 6:00 - 7:00 PM
Pirate Radio 104.7 FM & www.pirate1047.com - "Radio Memories" (Greeley) Sundays, 5:30 - 11:00 PM

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2013 Convention Schedules

2013 SPERDVAC Old-Time Radio Convention, Nov. 15 - 17

Programs, Dinners, Raffle, Auction

The Beverly Garland Holiday Inn, 4222 Vineland Ave., N. Hollywood, CA 91602

Contact: Barbara Williams (530) 990-4214, mrj131313@gmail.com, spervac@aol.com

No dialogue in that 40 seconds or so of air time, either. None needed. The sound effects told the story and all Fibber had to add was “I gotta clean out that closet some time.”

Fibber’s closet is generally considered the classic OTR sound effect, followed closely by a much different sound experience: the opening sequence of “Inner Sanctum Mysteries.” According to author Mott, the famous squeaking door sound actually was made by a squeaking *chair*, an old, dilapidated office tilt-back chair salvaged, like so many other sound effects, from the trash pile. The creaky, creepy sound was augmented ably by the low rumbling, eerie strains from the studio organ used throughout the show to maintain the dark and gloomy mood. Although the “host” set the scary scene in a menacing voice, it was an old chair and a musical instrument that really fired the imagination about the “horrible” events that were about to unfold!

The first use of sound effects on a dramatic show reportedly occurred on WGY in Schenectady, New York around 1922 or 1923. They were primitive just as radio broadcasting itself was. A husband and wife team, Arthur and Ora Nichols, joined CBS after a number of years of success as performers on stage and providing live music and sound effects for theaters showing silent films. Sound effects talents became regular and valuable staff members at radio networks just launching efforts to offer quality entertainment on the medium.

They became true artists and innovators, the best of them called “stars” and assigned to the most popular OTR shows including the Hollywood comedy offerings of Jack Benny, Bob Hope and Eddie Cantor. Hope reportedly was upset that the show’s sound effects man, Virgil Reimer, was getting too many laughs performing on stage in front of the audience. He asked that Reimer and his sound-making equipment be placed beyond a curtain. When Reimer threatened to take his talents elsewhere, Hope changed his mind. A good sound effects star was almost as important as the comedic leading man!!

Likewise, sound effects on dramatic shows can lend an authenticity that fires a listener’s imagination, perhaps taking him or her back in time to the Frontier town of Dodge City, Kansas. The U.S. Marshall there was Matt Dillon, a seasoned lawman of Dodge “and the territory on west.” The realistic, underplayed dialogue was enhanced greatly by the equally believable sound effects.

As the foremost chronicler of OTR and its colorful history, author John Dunning wrote in his *Encyclopedia of Old Time Radio*, “When Dillon and (his deputy) Chester rode the plains, the listener heard the faraway prairie wind and the dry squeak of Matt’s pants against saddle leather. When Dillon opened the jail door, the listener heard every key drop on the ring. Dillon’s spurs rang out with a dull clink-clank, missing occasionally, and the hollow boardwalk echoed dully as the nails creaked in the worn wood around them. Buckboards passed and the listener heard extraneous dialogue just above the muted shouts of kids playing in the alley. Noises could be heard from the next block, too, where the inevitable dog was barking.”



L-R Gun Smoke sound effects men Ray Kemper, Tom Hanley talking to director Norm McDonnell

The show described here is, of course, *Gunsmoke*. As most readers of *Return With Us Now* know and appreciate, the program was a smash hit during the latter days of “The Golden Age of Radio.” A long-running television version also was highly successful.

While the writing, the acting and the overall production values were superb and rightly recognized as such, the authentic sound effects placed *Gunsmoke* at the pinnacle of excellence in the annals of Old Time Radio.

A heavy rainstorm, gun shots, horses galloping, a cow being milked, train sounds with engines steaming and wheels click-clacking or maybe just a match being struck—a whole spectrum of sounds were created by these stars of OTR, advancing the plot or eliciting the applause and laughs in the studio--all sent over the airwaves to millions of listeners coast to coast without a word being spoken.

Today, computers are used to create a whole array of sounds, but sound effects artists in the OTR days were required to be ingenious in finding ordinary items that could produce extraordinary realistic sounds. A child’s roller skates were invaluable for the sound of elevator doors opening

and closing. In his book, author Mott cited several more examples including the sound of marching feet. “A series of wooden pegs were suspended by wire or a wooden frame,” writes Mott, “By rhythmically moving the pegs up or down or sliding them back and forth, a convincing marching sound was created.” In their minds, OTR listeners could easily imagine prisoners marching back to their cells or soldiers performing dismounted drill.

Sound effects were vital components of broadcasts during “The Golden Age of Radio, but music and the artists who wrote, arranged and performed it also played a very significant role in the production of programs from radio’s earliest days. Just as with sound effects, much of the total effect of a radio broadcast could be enhanced by music without a word being spoken.

Several programs devoted entirely to music as the vehicle to entertain drew large audiences and are worthy of treatment in an article or series of articles about their contributions to Old Time Radio. Memorable shows of that genre include *The Bell Telephone Hour*, *The Longines Symphonette*, *The American Album of Familiar Music*,



The extremely popular singer Kate Smith on the radio during the 1930’s through the 1950’s

Manhattan Merry-Go-Round, and *Cities Service Band of America*. Live performances of operas and symphony orchestras were aired regularly. Late night OTR featured the nation’s top dance bands in remote broadcasts from ballrooms in New York, Los Angeles and venues in between.

For the purposes of this write-up, however, the focus will be on music as it was used in drama, comedy and adventure offerings.

First, consider theme songs. Already mentioned is the mood of mystery and horror set in the opening of “Inner Sanctum.” All OTR fans will instantly recognize the “dum, tee, dum, dum” of “Dragnet”

fame. It’s hard to imagine Joe Friday could catch a criminal successfully without that distinctive musical introduction. “Mr. Keene, Tracer of Lost Persons” lived up to his theme, *Someday I’ll Find You*. The “Jack Benny Program” combined a strain or two from the tune Jack “murdered” on his violin (*Love in Bloom*) and an anthem in honor of his home base (*Hooray for Hollywood*.) Gioachino Rossini is far less well known for his overture to his *William Tell* opera than he is as the guy who wrote the theme for “The Lone Ranger.”



Jack Webb of “Dragnet”

Soap operas borrowed liberally from classical themes as well, possibly because the royalty rights for them long since had expired; *When A Girl Marries*, *Lorenzo Jones* and *Hilltop House* are among examples of classical melodies that helped set the scene for the seemingly never ending trials, troubles and tribulations of the characters portrayed. Studio organists provided the appropriate audio backdrops to all but a few of these daytime “washboard weepers” as one wag dubbed them. Guitars and even a harp also were employed on select shows.

Many of the most popular OTR soap operas including *Lorenzo Jones* and also *Stella Dallas*, *Amanda of Honeymoon Hill*, *Backstage Wife*, etc.) were produced by the prolific husband-wife team of Frank and Anne Hummert, who also brought some of the prime time musical shows to the air including the aforementioned *Manhattan Merry-Go-Round* and *The American Album of Familiar Music*. The Hummerts insisted that all melodies performed on their shows should be personally selected by them and reflect what are known today as “family values”, tunes that could be heard and enjoyed (and maybe hummed and sung) by ordinary folks. No hip-hop, no rapper in those days. The music was delivered in simple straightforward style without

flowery introductions—not much talk needed here; the music conveyed its own message.

It wasn't classical, but it *was* original. Who can forget the distinctive opening and close of that great mystery show with the surprise endings, "The Whistler?" All the listener really needed, was to hear the series of 37 notes whistled for 13 straight years by a talented woman named Dorothy Roberts. When Dorothy puckered up and let go, everyone knew that something strange and exciting was ahead.

Of course, even though this article is entitled "OTR Without Words" it should be conceded in this case that the eerie voice intoning the following message was an appropriately creepy complement to the haunting sound of the mysterious whistle: "*I am The Whistler. I know many things, for I walk by night. I know many strange tales, many secrets hidden in the hearts of men and women who have stepped in the shadows. Yes, I know the nameless terrors of which they dare not speak!*"

The list of great musical themes on OTR shows is virtually endless; the instant recognition that hearing them still provides is a tribute to the musical directors who wrote and/or performed then and to the producers who chose them.

The orchestras on the popular live OTR evening broadcasts were composed of top-flight musicians, many of whom performed also on movie sound stages, concerts and recordings. Not only did they signal the introductions and exits of the broadcasts, but they often provided appropriate segues from one scene or mood to another.

In the days when every production was live, the music makers were even used on commercials. Instrumental versions of some of the jingles created became as recognizable as the words reminding listeners of the virtues of "Rinso White", J-E-L-L-O, L-A-V-A, (Lava Soap) or C-A-M-E-L, (Camel cigarettes.)



Meredith Wilson (r) with Nelson Eddy

The orchestra leaders were key members of the team that worked with the writers, producers and directors. Some of these "maestros" not only arranged and conducted the music themes and bridges, but became characters on the shows as well. Chief among them was Meredith (double-l) Willson, who later created the famed Broadway and movie presentations of the hit shows, "The Music Man" and "The Unsinkable Molly Brown." Willson arranged the classy instrumental portions of the commercials on *Maxwell House Coffee Time* with George Burns and Gracie Allen. He "dropped by" George and Gracie for a comedy bit in each show as well. And, in a similar role, his orchestrations were featured on NBC's *The Big Show* in which he bantered with the show's MC, Tallulah Bankhead. Tallulah was noted for the low register of her voice and Willson replied to her questions by prefacing his responses in his flat Midwestern accent with the phrase "Well sir, Miss Bankhead..." Meredith Willson, consummate musician with a well developed sense of humor and a comic flair.

Other musicians who were featured as personalities included British composer/conductor Ray Noble on the program starring Edgar Bergen and his smart(alec) wooden would-be nemesis, Charlie McCarthy And, of course, Phil Harris, the band leader of the group of supposedly rowdy, drunken musicians, whose antics plagued Jack Benny in an ongoing series of comedic send ups on Benny's long running OTR Sunday outing.

By definition, words are essential in an audio medium such as Old Time Radio. But dramas would have been pretty dull and comedies not so funny without the marvelous contributions of the sound effects artists of those bygone days. It is obvious that OTR, and certainly the medium of radio as it exists today, would be bereft of its very *raison d'être* without the sound of music wafting over the airwaves.

It takes all three...voices, music and sound effects to fully enjoy the sensations created in The Theater of the Mind!

**RHAC LIBRARIAN SAFE FROM STORM BUT
CAN'T REACH SHOW COLLECTIONS**



The recent disastrous rain storms and flooding in a wide swath of northern Colorado not only cost the lives of many caught up in its fury, but forced evacuation of homes and businesses. One of those homes is owned by RHAC librarian David Gatch.

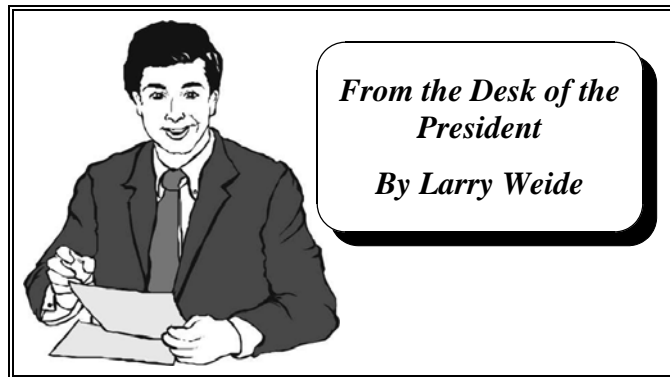
As noted in an insert in the September-October edition of *Return With Us Now*, Gatch was evacuated by helicopter safely from the area of the Big Thompson Canyon, but had to leave most of his belongings and three RHAC cassette libraries behind. His home and the OTR collection in the basement were spared. Power was out for several days, but has since been restored. But as of this writing in late October, weeks after the September deluge, the roads leading to his mountain neighborhood called "The Retreat", about two miles from the small town of Glen Haven, are still impassible.

Orders from the libraries involved (cassettes one, two and four) cannot be fulfilled in the interim. Gatch is not certain when he will be able to return to his home. He hopes it will be before cold weather and possible winter storms develop.

As he awaits developments, Gatch is staying with relatives in Denver. His work in financial services is based there, so he can be reasonably philosophical. But he is anxious to serve again the RHAC library "customers" and to regain access to his own personal OTR collection, which he began at an early age, inspired by his father, Marvin Gatch, a former Denver radio newsman and talk show host.

Meanwhile, rental services for cassette #3 and the CD library will continue as usual.

Readers are urged to visit the RHAC website www.rhac.org for updated information.



Hello everyone,

As promised, we've put our 2014 membership renewal materials in this issue of the newsletter - rather than waiting until the beginning of the new year. Hopefully this will give you plenty of time to fill out the form and send it in with your renewal check of \$15 by this coming January.

**JOHN DOE 1/1/14
123 ELM ST.
ANYTOWN DR 12345**

Note: As above, your newsletter address label always has the date printed on it that indicates the January of which year you need to renew your membership. **If the date is 1/1/15 or later then you are already paid up for 2014 and you should ignore the included membership material.**

If you read the column to the left you'll see that David Gatch, one of our two librarians, continues to be forced out of his home and away from his libraries due to the devastating rains and floods this last September in Colorado. Of course the significance to RHAC members is that there is currently no access to the libraries that David controls.

Lastly, the officers of RHAC and the staff of this newsletter want to wish you all the very best of this holiday season and good health and happiness in the coming new year.

With my very best regards,

Larry

RADIO HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION of COLORADO

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Librarian - Terry Hamilton

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(303) 596-7748

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Enclosed is my check or money order for the sum of \$_____ to cover the ONE MONTHS Rental charge of \$2.50 per set for the cassettes ordered. You are allowed to order 5 cassette sets at one time although you may only have 5 cassette sets from this library at one time.

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3 _____

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