

GUNSMOKE

Killers & Spoilers

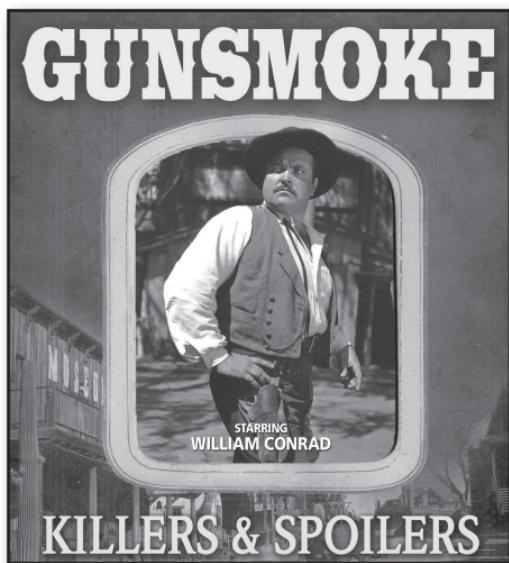
Program Guide by Elizabeth McLeod

It was comedian Fred Allen who once said, “Imitation is the sincerest form of television.” But to be honest, he could have been speaking just as accurately of radio. Throughout its short life span as the primary broadcast entertainment medium, radio stuck consistently to the safe and the proven. Any unusual new program form that caught on was instantly duplicated, over and over again, until the new paradigm became a cliché.

That’s the way any mass medium works -- radio, television, movies, you name it. And it’s why the programs that did try something new, that did establish those rare new paradigms, linger most in the creative memory. Such a program was *Gunsmoke*.

Long hailed as radio’s first “adult western,” *Gunsmoke* shattered clichés from the moment it began. For the better part of twenty years, most radio westerns had been kiddie fare. Even though such features as *The Lone Ranger* could boast a significant adult audience, their scripting remained “family friendly” before the term was invented -- featuring unambiguous heroes pursuing unambiguous villains in standardized plots across a genericized “old West” setting.

Though the Ranger and his imitators rode the radio range with great success through the 1930s and 1940s, even their most enthusiastic listeners knew not to expect anything new or challenging from their adventures. That’s just how it was, and that’s just how radio worked. Find a formula and stick to it.



But the years after World War II brought a new creative spirit to the medium, just as it was beginning to collapse under the weight of its accumulated clichés. New writers, directors, and actors found their way to the studios (often after completing military service). They made a point of shaking things up. And sometimes, when they combined efforts, they struck new and exciting creative sparks. So it was with producer-director Norman Macdonnell, editor John Meston, and actor William Conrad.

Macdonnell was a California native who got into radio as a young man, working as a pageboy at the Don Lee studios in Los Angeles in the early 1930s. He made his way to the CBS west coast production department, then dominated by the style of one of the medium's great early masters, the legendary William N. Robson. Macdonnell became a Robson protégé, absorbing his mentor's insistence on realistic characterization as the foundation of good radio drama. Military service interrupted Macdonnell's rise at CBS, but after participating in the Normandy landings, he was discharged in 1945, well prepared for whatever challenges he might encounter in the studios.

Meanwhile, John Meston was rising through the CBS-Hollywood Program Practices department. A Colorado native two years older than Macdonnell, Meston displayed strong editing skills as he vetted scripts for content through the early 1940s. By 1949, he had risen to the position of general script editor for all CBS programs originating on the West Coast. One of the series he supervised in this capacity was *Escape*, the network's showcase for tales of blood-and-thunder adventure, and a show then under the control of Norman Macdonnell.

Another rising young figure at CBS Hollywood was also a major presence at *Escape* as Macdonnell and Meston were establishing their primacy there. It was the rich, beefy voice of actor William Conrad that opened most *Escape* broadcasts

with an unforgettable challenge. "Tired of the everyday routine? Ever dream of a life of romantic adventure? We offer you -- ESCAPE!" Conrad had gotten his start at independent Los Angeles station KMPC in the years before the war, notably as part of the long-running horror anthology *The Hermit's Cave*. During wartime, he offered his talents to the Armed Forces Radio Service. He arrived at CBS in 1946, and immediately established himself as a key member of the network's Hollywood acting



William Conrad

troupe. Macdonnell knew Conrad's abilities well and, in addition to announcing duties, he cast Conrad in acting roles on dozens of *Escape* broadcasts. Macdonnell also employed Conrad for his lighter-weight anthology series *Romance*. John Meston was connected with this program as well, allowing the three to become well aware of their mutual talents.

As Meston, Macdonnell, and Conrad continued their work at CBS, trends in radio were heading in a direction that would act as a catalyst for their most notable collaboration. Radio drama in the late 1940s found itself moving steadily in a more realistic, more adult direction. This could be seen in the increased maturity of the scripts featured on such anthologies as *Escape* and *Suspense*. Continuing features (such as Jack Webb's landmark series *Dragnet*) offered an uncompromising look at law enforcement in action, with none of the romanticism or sensationalism that had characterized many previous police dramas. Radio was clearly ready for a new, grown-up take on many other timeworn genres...including westerns.



Norman Macdonnell and John Meston

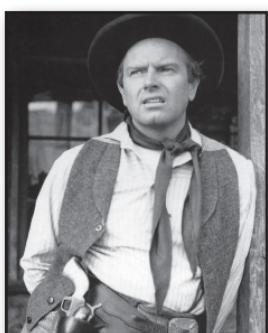
CBS head William Paley sensed this trend, and urged his production department to consider an "adult western." The concept was assigned to the production team then responsible for *The Adventures Of Philip Marlowe*. Writers Morton Fine and David Friedkin created a script that very much bore the mark of its ancestry, telling the story of a tough-as-nails U. S. Marshal named "Mark Dillon." The idea of a "hard boiled marshal," however, failed to impress Paley. A second audition was produced with a modified script and a new cast, featuring actor Howard Culver (who was then starring in the popular kiddie western *Straight Arrow*). Contractual conflicts with Culver prevented this project from moving beyond the audition stage, and it lay fallow in the CBS file cabinet until Macdonnell and Weston took it up in 1952.

Macdonnell and Meston, by that time, were well experienced with adult westerns, having produced several as episodes of *Escape*. Perhaps the most successful was "Wild Jack Rhett," which first aired in 1950 and told the story of a hired gunman engaged to bring order to a lawless western town. Meston's script, adapted from a short pulp-magazine story by Ernest Haycox, built on the characterization of Rhett as a determined, hard-bitten yet nuanced man who is challenged by both outlaws and townspeople as he goes about his duty. Moody narration by actor Parley Baer, and extremely detailed sound effects, further distinguished the broadcast and created an intense sense of place and time far beyond the radio

norm. Both Macdonnell and Meston were impressed with the quality of the production, and it whet their appetite for further exploration of the Western genre.

In early 1952, CBS asked Macdonnell to follow through on the idea of a regular Western series. Macdonnell, Meston, and writer Walter Brown Newman reviewed “Rhett,” a 1951 episode of *Romance* entitled “Pagosa,” and the two 1949 *Gunsmoke* auditions. Newman produced a script that combined the basic structure of the original Fine-Friedkin effort with the atmosphere and characterizations of the Macdonnell-Meston anthology productions. Howard Culver was out of the picture for the lead role and, while William Conrad’s name surfaced early in the casting discussions, there were concerns that he was simply too ubiquitous on the air to be effective in the role. Other actors were considered, discussed, and dropped before Meston, Macdonnell, and CBS finally agreed that Conrad was the best choice for the part.

Gunsmoke premiered to little fanfare in a sustaining Saturday timeslot on April 26, 1952. The first episode focused closely on the renamed “Matt” Dillon as he defused a mob situation, with Conrad delivering an intense performance in the lead. Also in the cast was Parley Baer, whose narration had been so effective in “Wild Jack Rhett.” He had a small role as a townsman named “Chester,” who would become Dillon’s deputy, sounding board, and friend. Actor Howard MacNear was present as the town doctor, a man so inured to the violence of frontier life that he approached even the bloodiest moments with a disquieting aplomb. Georgia Ellis, appeared in a throwaway part in that first episode, but Macdonnell was so impressed by her performance that a regular role was created for her. She would be heard each week as a sympathetic “saloon girl” (which was radio’s genteel Western-speak for “prostitute”) named Kitty who became Dillon’s emotional confidant -- perhaps the only one he’d ever had, or would ever have.



Parley Baer

That core group remained together for the next eight years, as *Gunsmoke* inspired a new trend in western drama. As was typical for the medium, even in its waning years, success bred imitation. Other “adult westerns” soon followed in its wake, including another fine collaboration from Macdonnell and Meston, the excellent *Fort Laramie*. But none of the series inspired by *Gunsmoke* managed to last anywhere near as long -- or to capture the powerful meshing of creative talent, quality writing, and complex characterization that distinguished the original.

Following the pattern laid out by “Wild Jack Rhett,” *Gunsmoke* always placed a strong emphasis on textured, hyper-realistic sound effects. Sound technicians Ray Kemper, Bill James, and Tom Hanley combined recorded effects with manually reproduced sounds to create a uniquely layered aural environment for the program. A single generic “horse hoof” sound effect might suffice for a kiddie western, but Kemper, James, and Hanley gave Macdonnell an entire stable full of horse effects, replicating the sound of horses moving on gravel, dirt, turf, wood, or stone depending on the what was called for in a given story. The squeak of saddle leather, and the jingle of spurs, were all recreated from such disparate items as old microphone cables, key rings, and coconut shells. These random things combined to create a realistic sound.



Ray Kemper and Bill Conrad

Gunsmoke was sustained by the network for its first two seasons. Radio was bleeding sponsorship dollars after the lifting of the Federal Communication Commission’s freeze on new television licenses, with sponsors deserting the older medium en masse in favor of more fertile fields. But even if sponsorship offers had been abundant, Macdonnell wasn’t entirely sure he wanted to forfeit his creative independence and adjust the program to suit a sponsor’s whims. Sponsors were notorious for demanding creative changes in the programs they financed, and Macdonnell was legitimately concerned about the possible watering-down of the uncompromisingly gritty drama he headed.

Finally, in the fall of 1953, General Foods picked up the program, with incongruous commercials for Sugar Crinkles, Post Toasties, and Sanka. That contract only lasted thirteen weeks, and it wasn’t until the summer of 1954 that *Gunsmoke* picked up its definitive sponsor: Liggett and Myers Tobacco. That firm had enjoyed a long and successful relationship with another pioneering hyper-realistic radio program, Jack Webb’s *Dragnet*, and *Gunsmoke* fit in well with the company’s masculine marketing image. Macdonnell kept his creative freedom, and *Gunsmoke* continued on its rugged way.

Television was a sensitive question for Macdonnell and Meston. CBS wanted a TV version of *Gunsmoke*, but Macdonnell had mixed feelings about the idea. While he certainly understood the benefits, he wasn’t at all comfortable with the idea of the increased involvement from executives and sponsors, which would be likely once the transition was made. But the inevitable prevailed, and CBS announced plans for a television *Gunsmoke* in 1955. Macdonnell and Meston



James Arness

Gunsmoke continued on radio with its original cast intact through the end of the decade. Macdonnell and Meston themselves used the series' popularity as a springboard to another fine collaborative product, *Fort Laramie* (a series that did for the cavalry Western what *Gunsmoke* had done for the law-enforcement Western). Even after CBS's other remaining dramatic series, *Suspense* and *Yours Truly, Johnny Dollar* relocated to New York in 1959, Macdonnell's influence kept *Gunsmoke* in Hollywood. It was the very last dramatic feature to originate in the Columbia Square studios. When the series finally expired in 1961, it drew the curtain, not just on radio's finest western feature, but on an entire era of outstanding West Coast radio drama.

Gunsmoke continued on television for another fourteen years before expiring in 1975. William Conrad would have his own unforgettable television role in the 1970s, as the fat-but-ferocious private investigator Frank Cannon. But his nine-year turn on radio as Matt Dillon remains the outstanding demonstration of his acting talent -- a role so indelibly his own that even Arness's fine twenty-year performance on the television *Gunsmoke* cannot entirely erase its memory. Together, Conrad, Macdonnell and Meston gave radio one of its definitive dramatic series, one often imitated -- but never surpassed.

GUNSMOKE
Starring William Conrad as Matt Dillon
With
Parley Baer, Georgia Ellis, and Howard McNear

Music composed and conducted by
Rex Koury
Sound patterns by
Ray Kemper, Bill James, and Tom Henley

Scripts edited by
John Meston

Produced and Directed by
Norman Macdonnell

CD 1A: “Last Fling” - 02/20/1954

Two old men come to town to blow off steam and trouble follows in their wake.

CD 1B: “Bad Boy” - 02/27/1954

A young man with poor choice in friends is led into a deadly situation.

CD 2A: “The Gentleman” - 03/06/1954

A slick Eastern gambler finds himself in a dangerous romantic entanglement.

CD 2B: “Confederate Money” - 03/13/1954

An innocent man accused of attacking his former employer seeks Dillon's help.

CD 3A: “Old Friend” - 03/20/1954

A hired gun comes to town...to fulfill a contract on Dillon!

CD 3B: “Blood Money” - 03/27/1954

A likeable newcomer turns out to have a dark past.

CD 4A: “Mr. and Mrs. Amber” - 04/03/1954

A husband-and-wife crime team? Or is there more to the story?

CD 4B: “Greater Love” - 04/10/1954

Bandits kidnap Doc...to help their wounded chief.

CD 5A: “What the Whisky Drummer Heard” - 04/17/1954

Dillon isn't dead, but people think he is!

CD 5B: “Murder Warrant” - 04/24/1954

A townsman shot in an ambush has a price on his head.



CD 6A: “Cara” - 05/01/1954

Dillon's old flame comes to town, but is she on the wrong side of the law?

CD 6B: “The Constable” - 05/08/1954

Dillon's uncompromising methods are bad for business, but is the alternative even worse?

CD 7A: “The Indian Horse” - 05/15/1954

A boastful cavalry officer comes to town for a horse race.

Parley Baer and Bill Conrad

CD 7B: “Monopoly” - 05/22/1954

An out-of-town business raider plans to have his way in Dodge.

CD 8A: “Feud” - 05/29/1954

Two feuding Ozark families bring their conflict to Dillon’s territory.



(From left to right) Bill Conrad,
Georgia Ellis, Howard McNear, and
Parley Baer

CD 8B: “The Blacksmith” - 06/05/1954

An immigrant German blacksmith tries to get along with everyone...but can’t.

CD 9A: “The Cover Up” - 06/12/1954

Dillon investigates two murders in one week.

CD 9B: “Going Bad” - 06/19/1954

A hard man comes to town...and proves to be a bad influence.

CD 10A: “Claustrophobia” - 06/26/1954

A killer with a fear of confinement is sentenced to life imprisonment.

(Note: This rehearsal recording includes some salty language.)

CD 10B: “Word of Honor” - 07/03/1954

Doc conceals a dark secret about his latest patient.

Elizabeth McLeod is a journalist, author, and broadcast historian. She received the 2005 Ray Stanich Award for excellence in broadcasting history research from the Friends Of Old Time Radio.

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