

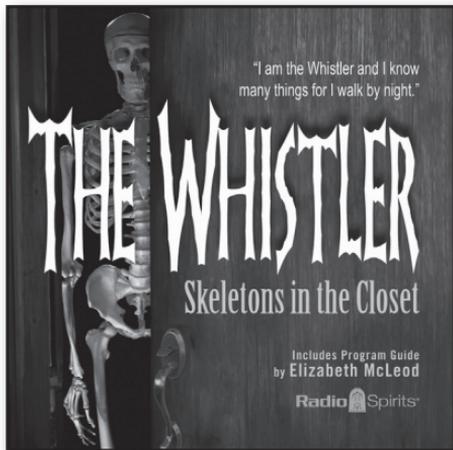
THE WHISTLER

Skeletons In The Closet

Program Guide by Elizabeth McLeod

In the darkest reaches of the human psyche, there is no corner quite so dark as the fear of nameless, inevitable Fate. With its startling twists and its mocking laughter, Fate can take any of us at any time, and throw us into a helpless spiral of doom. We know this, deep down, and it terrifies us. We confront this fear by taking delight in what the Germans call “schadenfreude,” a grim satisfaction at the cruelties that Fate metes out to others. Because if it’s happening to others, it isn’t happening to *us*...right? Popular entertainment has long played on this universal human trait, and few radio programs ever boiled down the formula to its essentials more successfully than the long-running West Coast anthology *The Whistler*.

Part of the program’s success was its unforgettable format: The Whistler himself, as the sneering narrator of each week’s story, was the personification of Fate -- and every sardonic phrase curling from his lips reflected the listener’s own sense of pleasure at hearing someone other than himself getting his just desserts. With each step along the path to his own destruction, the protagonist of each week’s *Whistler* story triggered that subconscious reaction in the listener’s own psyche that muttered “Gee, I’m glad I ain’t that guy.” It was so successful a formula, tapping into such a universal trait, that it quickly became, as announcer Marvin Miller proudly declared each week, “the most popular West Coast program in radio history.”



Whistler creator J. Donald Wilson wasn’t a psychologist by profession, but he was the next best thing so far as understanding the human mind is concerned. He was an actor, one who made his way into radio in the 1930’s

with a taste for suspense and mystery-oriented drama. Using his full name to avoid confusion with Jack Benny's jovial announcer-foil Don Wilson, J. Donald Wilson established his base at CBS's Hollywood studios. He played bit roles on various dramatic series originating there, but soon learned that he was more comfortable on the other side of the microphone. Wilson took up directorial duties for such programs as the detective drama *Miss Pinkerton*, and the syndicated *Cavalcade Of America* clone *The American Challenge*. In the spring of 1942, he put together his most memorable production.

The tradition of the sardonic host was far from innovative when Donald Wilson appropriated it for *The Whistler* -- it hailed back to the earliest days of network drama, when hosted anthologies were a dominant format on the air. The Whistler himself had a direct antecedent in the original conception of *The Shadow*, who goaded criminals on to their fate as an omniscient sinister narrator before taking on his more familiar cloaked-avenger persona. But, it was the characterization of The Whistler combined with the distinctive twist-finish scripts that made the program an immediate success.

Originally, The Whistler was a far more aggressive figure than he would later become. He would interact with the protagonists of his stories, taking on the role of a relentless, haunting conscience as he goaded them to their doom. But, as the series evolved, Wilson decided that the character was most effective as an outsider, an observer, a Greek Chorus figure who merely commented through a haze of fog, rain, and cigarette smoke, as the weekly victim found his own way to his destiny.



Joseph Kearns

To portray the host, Wilson turned first to actor/announcer Gale Gordon, who voiced the part for an audition episode in early 1942. But, Gordon's deep, dignified voice -- already becoming closely identified with stack-blowing comedy roles on such programs as *Fibber McGee and Molly* -- lacked the necessary edge. When CBS gave the series the green light, Wilson turned to Joseph Kearns, a stalwart of the network's stock company who played supporting roles on practically every series originating from the West Coast at one time or another. Kearns' voice was one of the most instantly recognizable on the air, with a nasal, metallic edge that could easily travel the line between sarcastic, sinister, and menacing. He set the tone for The Whistler's persona: you don't know how he knows all these stories he tells you, and you're actually afraid to ask.

Kearns carried the part through the early years of the series, simultaneously appearing on *Suspense* as “The Man In Black,” a variation on The Whistler theme. But, when Kearns left *The Whistler*, the narrator assumed his definitive voice -- issuing from the parched throat of veteran announcer Bill Forman. Forman made his name in radio at KMPC, the “Station of the Stars” in Beverly Hills. He had served there as a staff announcer and news editor, and spent several years producing and acting in the station’s local version of the Detroit-originated horror anthology *The Hermit’s Cave*. He later moved on to NBC, attracting notice as the announcer for the wacky musical quiz program *Kay Kyser’s Kollege of Musical Knowledge*, where one of the popular attractions became a “see if you can come up with a dialect Forman can’t do” contest. With a voice even sharper and more threatening than Kearns’, and with a strong background in radio horror and suspense, Forman proved the ideal Whistler.



Bill Forman

The program’s format crystallized early. Each story would begin with The Whistler setting the scene, describing an ordinary person’s ordinary routine -- and then, in a few icy phrases, he would establish the moral dilemma faced by that character. He would reappear at intervals throughout the story, addressing the protagonist directly, reminding him again and again of the missteps that he was making. Then, at the conclusion of the story, he would tighten the figurative noose. There were no happy endings for the victims of The Whistler’s particular brand of cruel fate -- no matter how carefully-laid their plans, there was always one error, one slip up, one missed thread that unraveled the whole plot. “The strange ending to tonight’s *Whistler* drama” outdid any twist ending in O. Henry’s repertoire, bringing characters to their grim, well-deserved destinies with considerable panache.

Equally important in setting the mood for each *Whistler* story was the distinctive music, composed and conducted by CBS West Coast music director Wilbur Hatch. Relying on ominous-sounding woodwinds overlaid with a particularly unnerving emphasis on the flute, Hatch’s music carried the perfect flavor of the ordinary turned extraordinary. Hatch was also responsible for the unforgettable *Whistler* theme, a complex, two-octave minor-key progression that sounded like nothing else on the air. Difficult for anyone short of a professional whistler to master, the theme was generally performed by Dorothy Roberts, a one-time vaudeville performer whose whistling talent earned her occasional novelty billings with dance bands. Never was her gift put to more effective use than it was on *The Whistler*.



Poster for Columbia Picture's 1945 B-movie
Voice of the Whistler

performance. Frequently, the cast didn't even receive name credit, although they included such quality radio actors as Elliot Lewis, Gerald Mohr, Lurene Tuttle, Hans Conreid, Frank Lovejoy, and Mercedes McCambridge.

Just as Allen became *The Whistler's* definitive director, so too did CBS staffer Harold Swanton become its definitive writer. While the series frequently used freelance scripts, it was Swanton who gave them their final polish, and it was Swanton who honed the formula created by Wilson to a razor-sharp edge. He was a master of creating ordinary situations that soon snowballed into outlandishly threatening predicaments -- all the while keeping his desperate protagonists dangling from the thinnest possible thread of hope until the story's final moments, when that thread would be suddenly and emphatically severed. Whether working solo or in partnership with fellow scripter Joel Malone, Swanton's stories stand out as the best scripts in the *Whistler* canon.

The Whistler was noted for the consistency of its sound and its format over the course of its run -- there is very little evident difference between a *Whistler* broadcast from 1944 from one from 1954. The sound, the style, the mood, and the tone remained very much the same for the program's entire tenure on the air. Even its sponsor remained consistent, with the California-based Signal Oil Company carrying the program over the CBS Pacific chain for eleven seasons. But, even as the series was topping popularity charts on the West Coast -- an accomplishment touted in its opening

J. Donald Wilson wrote most of the early scripts for *The Whistler* himself, but he left the series about a year and a half into the run to supervise a series of *Whistler B* movies being produced by Columbia Pictures. His replacement, George W. Allen, would preside over the era of the program's greatest success. Allen was the director of programming at KNX, the flagship of the Columbia Pacific Network, and continued in that position throughout his tenure at the helm of *The Whistler*, supervising a wide range of local and regional productions. Unlike Wilson, Allen didn't personally write the episodes -- he turned that job over to network staff writers -- but, he did direct each broadcast, revealing a flair for tight, punchy dramas that never failed to whip listeners around like the radio equivalent of a roller coaster. Unlike his *Suspense* counterpart William Spier, Allen didn't have the budget to indulge in big-name stars. His cast was invariably drawn from the pool of house talent on hand at the Columbia Square studios. On *The Whistler*, story and technique were more important than

signature during the series' glory years -- national success was not to be. Attempts to bring the program to Eastern and Midwestern audiences met with only middling success and sporadic runs. Like so many other quality regional programs of the 1940s, *The Whistler* was largely unknown to most of the United States.

The Whistler lasted on radio into the mid-1950's, its distinctiveness intact, and enjoyed a brief run as a syndicated television series. With J. Donald Wilson again at the helm, with adaptations of many of Harold Swanton's scripts, with Bill Forman again in the title role, and with Dorothy Roberts continuing to whistle, the television series was one of the most faithful of the radio-to-TV adaptations. In West Coast markets, the continuity with the radio version extended even to sponsorship, with Signal Oil signing on to back the series.

Wilson and George W. Allen remained active in broadcasting into the 1960's. Bill Forman remained busy as an announcer, most notably on *The Phil Harris-Alice Faye Show* concurrent with his run as *The Whistler*. Wilbur Hatch continued to compose and conduct for radio and television, with his most familiar post-*Whistler* work being his years as musical director for *I Love Lucy*. Writer Harold Swanton, however, had the most extended career once *The Whistler* left the air, notably as a staff writer for *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*. But, eventually, changes in public tastes took Swanton far away from the grim tales of fate he'd once made his specialty. In the 1960's, he landed at the Walt Disney Studios, where he specialized in wholesome tales of animals and small children, such as the story of "Rascal" the raccoon. His career wrapped up in the 1970's, as a frequent contributor to, of all things, *Little House On The Prairie*. No dark, sarcastic conscience figure, no grim avatar of a cold and merciless Fate ever haunted Walnut Grove. However, thanks to the preservation of the bulk of *The Whistler's* radio run, this compelling series continues to thrill a new generation of listeners.



A classic Signal station
gas pump

THE SIGNAL OIL COMPANY presents

THE WHISTLER

Created by J. Donald Wilson

Produced and Directed by J. Donald Wilson and George W. Allen

Music composed and conducted by Wilbur Hatch

Script Supervision by Harold Swanton and Joel Malone

Whistling by Dorothy Roberts

Featuring Joseph Kearns and Bill Forman as The Whistler

With

Marvin Miller announcing

CD 1A: “House of Greed” - 09/05/1942

When a kindly, gentle man realizes that all of his relatives have been exploiting his good nature, he decides to take advantage of the situation. Written and directed by J. Donald Wilson.

CD 1B: “The Alibi” - 10/25/1942

A hard-bitten old family matriarch provokes her relatives to murder. Written by J. Donald Wilson and Herbert Connor.

CD 2A: “Apparition” - 11/15/1942

As the heirs of a wealthy man squabble over his estate, the ghost of the decedent himself decides to take a hand in the proceedings. Written and directed by J. Donald Wilson.



Gerald Mohr is featured in both “The Weakling” and “Five Cent Call”

CD 2B: “The Double Cross” - 12/27/1942

Two brothers take opposing paths in life -- one is a hard-bitten ex-convict, the other an honest cop. When the ex-con is accused of going back to his crooked ways, circumstances take a sudden twist. Written and directed by J. Donald Wilson.

CD 3A: “The Weakling” - 01/03/1943

A dedicated, thoroughly honest district attorney is confronted with his worst nightmare: his own son, charged with murder. Written and directed by J. Donald Wilson.

CD 3B: “Legacy of Death” - 02/14/1943

Can a bent toward murder be carried in the genes? A desperate young woman fears it can. Written and directed by J. Donald Wilson.

CD 4A: “The Man Who Waited” - 05/16/1943

A cruel, wealthy woman viciously opposes her son’s plans to marry -- and won’t be reasoned with. Written and directed by J. Donald Wilson.

CD 4B: “Death Sees Double” - 11/20/1944

A jealous twin plots to assume her sister’s identity -- only to realize too late that she’s made a mistake. Written by Ralph Rose.

CD 5A: “Windfall” - 12/18/1944

A desperate man pins all his hopes on an expected bequest from a wealthy uncle -- and considers hastening the old man’s death. Written by Harold Swanton.

CD 5B: “The Body Wouldn’t Stay in the Bay” - 01/08/1945

Dead women tell no tales? Here’s one who does. Written by Hugh Keegan.

CD 6A: “Seascape” - 01/22/1945

Murder and jealousy strike the residents of a remote lighthouse. Written by Victor Kushner.

CD 6B: “Death Pays a Visit” - 06/11/1945

A crooked bank clerk faces an audit with no possible escape -- until his feckless cousin shows up for a visit with a thick bankroll in hand. Written by Lewis Reed.

CD 7A: “The Man Who Came To Murder” - 08/06/1945

A dutiful nephew cares for his dying aunt...and helps himself to her money. Written by Sally Thorson.

CD 7B: “Poison is Quicker” - 12/03/1945

A murder-mystery enthusiast becomes a victim of her greatest passion. Written by Lesley Edgely.

CD 8A: “The Thin Line” - 01/07/1946

A couple moves to a small western town for the wife’s health -- but her husband finds other distractions. Written by Buckley Angel.



Signal Oil print advertisement for
The Whistler.

CD 8B: “The Strange Sisters” - 01/28/1946

Family skeletons rattle furiously among a bickering group of sisters.
Written by Bernard Gerard.

CD 9A: “Dear Roger” - 01/06/1947

Tensions build between a woman and her husband. Written by Stuart Novins.

CD 9B: “Night Melody” - 01/27/1947

A man murders his wife...and misplaces her body. Written by Harold Swanton and Joel Malone.

CD 10A: “Backlash” - 04/21/1947

A man desperately wants to see his aunt dead, but he should be careful what he wishes for. Written by J. Douglas Ware.

CD 10B: “Five Cent Call” - 02/19/1950

Crosses and double-crosses complicate life on the Barbary Coast of San Francisco. Written by Adrian Gendot.



Betty Lou Gerson is featured in
“Five Cent Call”

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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