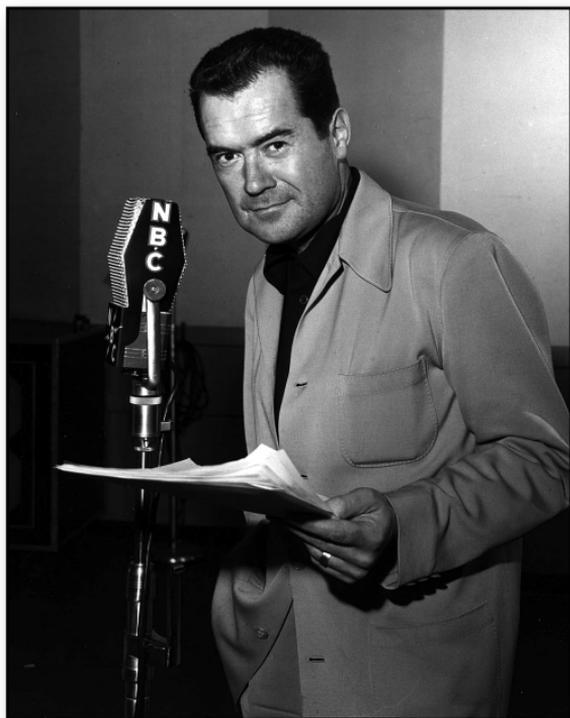


NIGHT BEAT

Nightside is Different

Program Guide by Elizabeth McLeod

The pen is mightier than the sword, but is it mightier than the .45? That's the dilemma faced by hard-nosed crime reporter Randy Stone each week in one of radio's most memorable newspaper dramas: *Night Beat*. One in a wave of realistic crime shows to sweep the networks at the dawn of the 1950s, it failed to make much of an impression during its original run. However, in the decades since, it's been rediscovered by a new generation of radio enthusiasts as a prime example of what might be called "newspaper noir."



Frank Lovejoy stars as *Night Beat's* Randy Stone.

Night Beat was the heir to a long tradition of newspaper dramas when it came to NBC in 1950. For over twenty years, radio fans had enjoyed the adventures of scrappy, smart-mouthed newshounds as they battled for scoops, dodging felons and curmudgeonly editors with equal alacrity. The first newspaper drama, in fact, was one of the earliest network serials; *Cub Reporter*, written by, and starring, former newspaperman Peter Dixon, was a popular favorite on NBC Blue in 1929. While forgotten today, this early program established many of the conventions that would carry over in future radio newspaper tales: the constant jousting for



Edmund O' Brien starred in the audition episode of *Night Beat*.

gentlemen of the press. A later series, *The Big Story*, even dramatized the adventures of real-life newspapermen and women, proving that truth could be just as thrilling as fiction, given the proper treatment.

But with all this, radio newspaper drama never quite fully shed the slight whiff of exaggeration, of caricature. No matter who played the roles, no matter what the stories, the image in the listener's mind when a reporter was depicted would invariably be that of a snappy-talking wiseguy in a checked sport coat with a press card stuck in the band of his snap-brim fedora. As entertaining as that caricature became, it really didn't depict the routine of the average newsman. It remained for writer Larry Marcus and actor Frank Lovejoy to bring listeners radio's first truly grown-up newspaper drama.

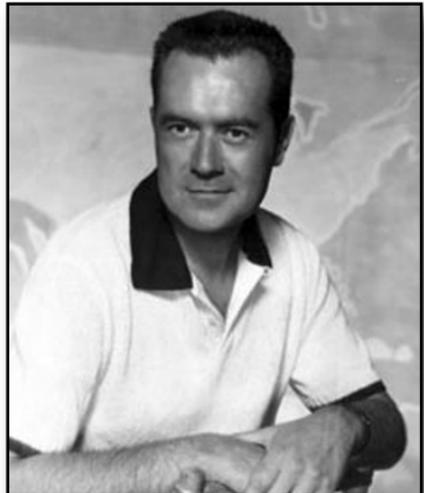
Lawrence B. Marcus was one of the army of aspiring young screenwriters to descend upon Hollywood in the years immediately following the Second World War. Born in a small Utah town in 1917, Marcus began dabbling in writing during his Army Air Corps stint, and bounced from London to Rome to South Africa before returning stateside. Landing at Warner Brothers, he found himself assigned to an ill-fated project for film-noir favorite Edmund O'Brien, teaming with two other young scribes to turn out a rather improbable bit of drama called *Somewhere In The City*, a tale of a man desperately racing against time to prove his best friend innocent of murder. A noirish and rather confusing melodrama layered with flashback sequences, the film was completed by the middle of 1948 – but, Warners then cut and recut it several times before finally releasing it in 1950 under the title *Backfire*.

During the shoot, however, Marcus and O'Brien hit it off. While between film assignments, Marcus wrote an NBC audition script for O'Brien, proposing a new thriller series about an enterprising Chicago newspaperman that focused as much on characterization as investigation. An audition recording of the script, entitled "Night Beat," was recorded in the spring of 1949 starring O'Brien as reporter "Hank

Mitchell.” It caught the network at precisely the right time. Crippled by the recent loss of most of its top comedy performers to rival CBS, the network was retooling its schedule to place a heavy emphasis on crime and thriller programming. The Marcus/O’Brien project seemed a perfect fit, and by early 1950 the project was ready to go forward.

Unfortunately, it would have to go forward without Edmund O’Brien himself. Too busy with film work, the actor had to pass when the series was picked up by the network. The lead role, renamed “Randy ‘Lucky’ Stone,” had to be recast. Enter one of radio’s most talented journeymen, Frank Lovejoy. Born in the Bronx in 1912, Lovejoy had originally set out in life to work in finance, but certain incidents in the fall of 1929 put him off that idea. In lieu of any other opportunities, he took up acting. His family had a tenuous show business connection — his father had worked as a film salesman for the Pathe Exchange in the 1910s. His connections opened a few necessary doors, giving the young Lovejoy the necessary breaks. After a few productive roles with small-time East Coast stock companies, he landed on Broadway, where he honed a distinctive tough-guy persona before turning to radio in the mid-1930s. He quickly made a name for himself around the networks as a versatile performer on soap operas and anthology dramas, always distinctive and recognizable for his ever-so-slightly-sardonic voice and manner.

By the end of the thirties, Lovejoy became one of the few soap actors to receive up-front billing, for his role on the CBS daytime serial *Your Family And Mine*. In all of his roles, Lovejoy’s characterizations were recognizable for their quiet intensity. A Lovejoy character rarely became outraged or furious, seldom gave any indication of the possibility that he could ever fly out of control. A Lovejoy character didn’t need a gun to be tough, and didn’t need to tell you he was tough. His toughness was evident from the moment he spoke, and nothing more was needed than the steely sound of his voice. Married to radio actress Joan Banks, Lovejoy became, during the 1940s, one of radio’s most reliable character actors — seldom playing flashy lead roles, but always dependable for second leads and supporting roles. He even had an early shot at one of radio’s major hot-shot-reporter roles, when in July 1943 he was announced as the lead in the new CBS thriller *Flashgun Casey*. By the time the series actually premiered, however, the role had passed instead to actor Matt Crowley. That series went on to its



A young Frank Lovejoy.



Joan Banks, Lovejoy's real-life wife, can be heard on four episodes in this collection, including "Sanctuary" and "Target for a Week."

greatest success as *Casey, Crime Photographer*, with Staats Cotsworth in the lead.

After the war, Lovejoy turned to films as a side pursuit. He had dabbled in some very minor movie projects before the war, but nothing ever came of these; and, nothing in his rather unassuming personality pushed him to seek stardom. His radio reputation nonetheless earned him small, but rewarding, parts in crime and war pictures. Gradually, he became a recognizable face as well as a voice. By 1950, when he was approached by Marcus about *Night Beat*, he had become sufficiently well-known as a performer that NBC was willing to accept him as a lead actor.

Marcus wrote the first several scripts for the new series. He then assumed the position of story editor, ensuring that all subsequent scripts followed his carefully-crafted model, while such outstanding radio scribes as Russell Hughes, Lou Rusoff, and David Ellis turned out scripts according to his specifications. While guns would blaze and thugs would prowl the back alleys of Randy Stone's Chicago, the emphasis in the new series was intended from the start to be on the stories of the people Stone met. This formula immediately served to humanize the reporter, making him far less an idealized, crusading hero than a working stiff doing his job - almost a Joe Friday with a pencil instead of a badge. Solving crimes was almost incidental to the weekly unraveling of common human problems, giving Randy Stone's adventures an edge of realism that had long been lacking in radio's tales of the press, and giving *Night Beat* the flexibility of an anthology series in the variety of stories it could tell.

Although *Night Beat* has occasionally been described as an example of "radio noir," it really only fits that classification in the most superficial way. In true "noir," characters are motivated by the darkest side of human nature, and the pervading mood is one of bleak and overwhelming cynicism. Nothing is ever as it seems on the surface — and usually, everything is much worse. While *Night Beat* certainly shared the foggy alleys and rain-swept streets of classic noir, its overall view of human nature was far more upbeat. Randy Stone encountered plenty of people who found themselves, for one reason or another, on the wrong side of the law; but, most often they were there in spite of themselves. Randy Stone's stories focused not on the essential corruption of humanity, but on its basic decency. His own cynicism was only a veneer, a mask assumed as, perhaps, a protection against those forces which corrupted others against their will. Although he himself would certainly have been the last to admit it, Randy Stone, hardboiled journalist, was actually a sentimentalist at heart.

Night Beat also avoided most of the clichés which had overtaken radio crime programs during the late forties. While Randy Stone's first-person-singular narration of his adventures might occasionally venture into the overdramatic, he never sank into the quagmire of exaggerated pseudo-Raymond Chandlerese that so many lesser radio thrillers foisted on their audiences at the turn of the fifties. Likewise, *Night Beat* steered clear of the tendency to over-romanticize and over-dramatize the day-to-day routine of a reporter's life. Randy Stone might well have worn a trench coat and pushed-back fedora from time to time, but you could be sure that if he did, it was only because it was raining. He was too busy *being* a reporter to live up to listeners' clichéd expectations of how a reporter *should* talk and act. In this, *Night Beat* had much in common with *Dragnet*, the path-breaking police procedural series that began in 1949 and quickly established a new standard for realism in radio crime stories.

Unconventional by the standards of the time, *Night Beat* attracted only lukewarm support from sponsors and network. Originally presented as an NBC sustainer, it bounced from point to point on the schedule before attracting sponsorship by General Mills on behalf of Wheaties. But, Randy Stone was a far cry from Jack Armstrong, and the Wheaties connection didn't stick. A subsequent sponsorship by Pabst Beer was equally brief. Once again, it was back to seemingly-random schedule changes until the series finally disappeared in the spring of 1952.

Not long after the series ended its radio run, Marcus and Lovejoy joined forces with director Warren Lewis and producer Don Sharpe to form The Night Beat Company, in an effort to bring the program to television. In the spring of 1953, the company set up operations on the RKO-Pathé lot in Hollywood and filmed a pilot, but plans called for any eventual series to differ in format from the radio program in one key respect: with Lovejoy's movie career picking up steam, he could commit to appearing in only a fraction of any TV *Night Beat* episodes. Were the series to be picked up, Randy Stone would appear in person in only one out of every three episodes. The other two would focus on Randy's various friends and colleagues, with Lovejoy appearing only as a host who would introduce each story and then step aside.

The pilot was picked up for distribution by the television arm of Official Films, producers of the successful *Four Star Playhouse*, and was shopped around to prospective sponsors during the summer of 1953, but there were no bites. The format was revised that fall, with Sharpe announcing plans for a unique "modular" series, in which Ronald Reagan and Macdonald Carey would appear as Stone's fellow reporters - with each stationed in a different city, but all of them investigating aspects of the same national story.



Virginia Gregg is featured in *Night Beat's* "The Search for Fred" episode.



Frank Lovejoy

Each “module” would have a different sponsor, and could stand alone as a separate series if required. This concept proved too revolutionary for its time, and there were no takers. Official finally dumped the original pilot into a *Four Star Playhouse* anthology slot in 1954 and abandoned the project, bringing *Night Beat* to an end.

Frank Lovejoy and Larry Marcus went on to other projects. Both would work extensively in television during the 1950s and early 1960s. After a one season run as the lead on television’s *Meet McGraw* (1957-58), Lovejoy would never again have his own series. As the memory of Randy Stone receded into the past, he kept busy with guest shots and supporting roles in a wide range of dramatic series, while spending his summer vacations appearing in various stage productions. It was during one such production in 1962 that he collapsed and died from a sudden heart attack. He was only a few months past his fiftieth birthday.

Larry Marcus would remain in Hollywood as an increasingly popular screenwriter, moving from television to high-prestige film projects by the end of the 1960s. His 1968 script for Richard Lester’s film *Petulia*, with George C. Scott and Julie Christie, earned critical plaudits and a nomination for a Writer’s Guild award. He would go on to earn an Academy Award nomination for his 1980 film script *The Stuntman*. At the end of his life, he taught screenwriting at New York University - no small accomplishment for a man with an eighth-grade education. He died in 2002.

Night Beat would remain a forgotten gem until its rediscovery by Old Time Radio enthusiasts in the 1970s and 1980s, when syndicated reruns of the program brought it to the attention of a whole new generation of fans. At long last, it earned due recognition as radio’s finest newspaper drama. Its careful depiction of human nature as seen through the eyes of a decent, hardworking journalist stands as one of the high points of its era.

The National Broadcasting Company
presents
NIGHT BEAT
Starring Frank Lovejoy as Randy Stone
Created by Larry Marcus
Music by Frank Worth
Directed by Warren Lewis

08/07/1950 “Old Blind Pop” by Russell Hughes

In a script not unlike those that Hughes turned out for *Damon Runyon Theatre*, Randy tries to help an elderly street musician whose life has taken an unfortunate criminal turn.

05/25/1951 “Fear” by Larry Marcus

A tense psychological thriller explores Randy’s mounting fear as he reacts to a letter threatening his life.

06/08/1951 “The Search for Fred” (a.k.a. “A Hot Night In June”) by Larry Marcus

The random bite of a rabid dog prompts a race against time to locate the victim before the disease becomes incurable.

06/15/1951 “Otto, the Music Man” (a.k.a. “Old Baldy”) by Gwen Bagni

Randy investigates an unusually talented jazz musician who resists all attempts to uncover his mysterious past.

06/22/1951 “Sanctuary” by Selig Lester

Tension mounts as Randy covers the story of a small child being held hostage in a church tower.

06/29/1951 “Byline for Frank” by Michael Hayes

At the bedside of a dying colleague, Randy is given an urgent assignment.

07/06/1951 “Bill Perrin Amnesia Case” by Merwyn Gerard

Randy investigates the case of a wounded veteran who can remember nothing of his past life...except that his wife is missing.

07/13/1951 “Antonio’s Return” by Larry Marcus

Randy becomes involved in a missing persons case when he encounters a dying woman who is determined to find her husband before it’s too late.

05/01/1952 “Pay Up or Die” by David Ellis

Randy’s attempt to help a colleague get out from under his gambling debts ends up with his very life standing on the turn of a card.

05/08/1952 “Long Live the Clown” by John Bagni

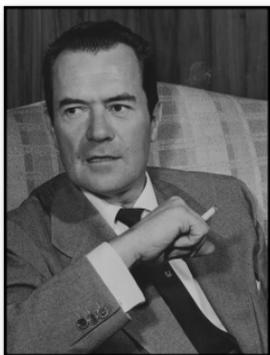
Randy investigates the improbable case of a murdered circus clown with a sinister double life.

05/15/1952 “The Death of Riley” by Kathleen Hite

Randy tries to help a hard-drinking manufacturer who has seemingly lost all hope.



Paul Frees joins the cast for both
“The Search for Fred” and
“The Death of Riley.”



Frank Lovejoy

05/22/1952 “Target for a Week” by David Ellis
A campaign by a reporter on a rival paper lands Randy in the most desperate situation of his life: facing a murder charge.

05/29/1952 “The Jockey Brothers” by Larry Roman
Two feuding brothers carry Randy on a wild ride through the world of horse racing.

06/05/1952 “The Marvelous Machine” by Arthur Ross
Randy probes the case of a computer scientist whose invention has brought him into unfortunate contact with the underworld.

07/17/1952 “A Taste of Peaches” by Irwin Ashkenazi
Randy becomes enmeshed in the case of an ex-convict desperate to recover his lost loot before rival thugs find it.

09/11/1952 “Larry the Understudy” by Gwen Bagni
Randy is caught up in the backstage drama as a crime lord determines to make his girlfriend a star...no matter what.

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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