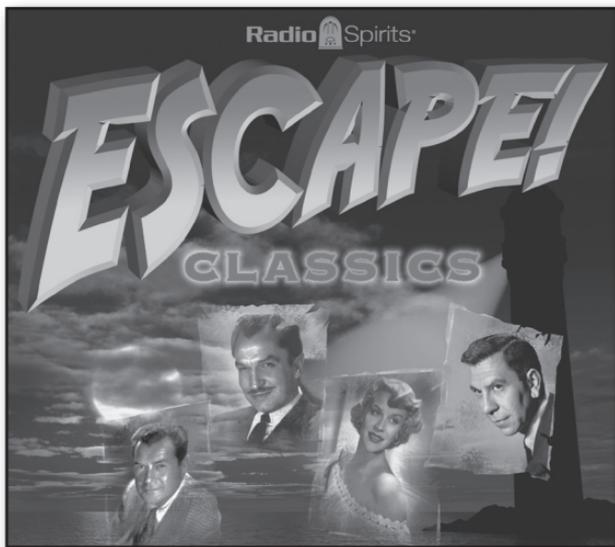


# ESCAPE Classics

Program Guide by Elizabeth McLeod

*“Tired of the everyday routine? Ever dream of a life of romantic adventure? We offer you...Escape!  
Designed to free you from the four walls of today for a half hour of high adventure!”*

With those words, postwar radio listeners prepared for a weekly dose of concentrated thrills, prepared by some of radio’s top creative talent. And even though *Escape* hit the air as the dust was settling following the Second World War, nearly a quarter-century after the birth of modern broadcasting, it can rightly be said that this series was, in a very real sense, pioneering.



*Escape* certainly wasn’t the first adventure program on radio -- but it was one of the first adventure-focused anthology programs intended for an adult audience. Although grown-up adventure had a presence on the air in the 1920’s, it fell from favor during the Depression -- giving way to more genre-oriented crime and mystery thrillers. Sherlock Holmes might have exciting adventures, but listeners tuning in each week would never hear him riding across a bleak desert landscape in the Old West, or board a futuristic rocket ship in the

vast expanse of outer space, or marooned on a Pacific island as hostile natives closed in for the kill. The radio adventure characters of the 1930's were invariably prisoners of their genre -- their format, setting, and gimmicks defined them, and there was little opportunity for them to flex the imaginations of their listeners beyond those well-defined boundaries.

The latter half of the 1930's saw a mild resurgence of adult-oriented thriller anthologies, which offered more variety in characterization and setting than programs built around a single established character, but even these programs had their limits. Many of the "experimental drama" programs of the late thirties dabbled in adventure material, among many other subjects, but often the storyline took second place to technique, as with the *Columbia Workshop* and *Lights Out*, or behind the social and philosophical viewpoints of the author, as in *Arch Oboler's Plays* and the various productions of Norman Corwin. While such programs offered outstanding platforms for the exploration and expansion of radio's dramatic capabilities, they often fell short in the creation of pure, raw excitement.

The other primary venue for adventure programming in the years before the war tended to be those programs directed toward children, and these programs very quickly fell into a formula. Children's adventure programs depended not on new ideas, but instead on the constant, on-going turnover of their audiences. All that was necessary to create a successful juvenile adventure program was to develop an easily identifiable formula, and then endlessly recycle it.

The war years brought a revival of interest in adult-oriented anthology programs, with espionage and military propaganda themes blending in with the established crime and horror tales. The most outstanding example of an anthology series successfully combining such elements while avoiding formula and retaining grown-up appeal appeared in the summer of 1942 with the premiere of *Suspense*. Here was a series clearly devoted to adult listeners, with stories intended to produce thrills without recourse to cheap formula-driven stunts. And the anthology format guaranteed that there would be no established lead character who must always survive to adventure another week. Within a year of its debut, *Suspense* stood as one of radio's most respected dramatic programs -- and within CBS, it established itself as worthy of imitation.



William N. Robson and his sons in 1948.

Such was the reasoning at CBS in the winter of 1946-47, when work began on a potent variation on the *Suspense* pattern. Veteran

producer-director William N. Robson -- in many ways the founding father of the CBS-Hollywood dramatic department -- began work on a new anthology intended for possible use as a summer replacement series. The new program would be, on the surface, quite similar to *Suspense* with its emphasis on tales of tension and excitement -- but with a subtle difference. *Suspense* had built its reputation on tales of ordinary people trapped in unsettling circumstances that gradually escalated into something extraordinary. Robson's new feature would take this idea to the next level, thrusting his protagonists into circumstances that were extraordinary from the start. Whereas Bernard Herrmann's subtle church bell theme music for *Suspense* hinted at this gradual progression toward a tense climax, Robson's new series would open with the most explosive musical theme possible, a crashing rendition of Mussorgsky's "Night on Bald Mountain." The contrast between the two programs would be obvious from the very start. Even the title chosen for the new series would emphasize this contrast. *Suspense* was a descriptive, rather passive title, but the new series would be called by a bold, emphatic action word: *Escape!* The title wasn't original, it had been used by a short-lived NBC anthology a few years earlier, but Robson's new production would make the name entirely its own.

*Escape's* audition program was rather uncharacteristic, by the program's later standards. Entitled "Dead of the Night," the script offered a dark, horror-tinged tale of two feuding ventriloquists that might have fit quite well on *Suspense*. But once the actual series run began in July 1947, *Escape* began to define its own ground. Most of the episodes during that first summer season were drawn from traditional adventure literature, with hairy-chested tales by such authors as Rudyard Kipling, Joseph Conrad, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Arthur Conan Doyle. These were all safe, predictable choices for a series specializing in high adventure, and Robson produced them slickly, and with class. But a hint of what was to make the series unique turned up in the third program of that initial summer series, with an adaptation of "A Diamond As Big As The Ritz" by F. Scott Fitzgerald -- hardly a name associated with red-blooded adventure fiction. Robson's team made the tale fit the format and, by doing so, demonstrated that "adventure" was a word they didn't intend to hold to a narrow, exclusive definition.

That first summer run failed to attract a sponsor, and CBS viewed the series as little more than inexpensive schedule filler. As long as Robson and his staff got the programs on air on time each week, the network paid little attention to what they did. Although the lack of a sponsor would cripple *Escape's* efforts to build a steady audience in a regular time slot for most of its run, that freedom



F. Scott Fitzgerald

from sponsor or agency interference in matters of story material or production style allowed the producers of the program to follow their own inclinations.

Once its summer run was over, *Escape* returned to the air in the early fall of 1947 -- proving its value as a program that could be dropped into any open time slot on the schedule to fill an immediate need. During this run, the series quickly hit its stride, offering a string of episodes that would prove definitive examples of high-quality radio adventure. After a sequence of extremely effective programs based on the works of such authors as H. G. Wells, Edgar Allen Poe, and John Collier, Robson and his team scored an outstanding triumph in their December 10th adaptation of Ambrose Bierce's dark classic of Civil War fiction, "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge." Tightly performed by CBS-Hollywood stalwarts Harry Bartell, Luis Van Rooten, William Conrad, and Bill Johnstone, and with a script adapted by Robson himself, the tale of the last moments of a Confederate sympathizer condemned to hang made effective use of time compression and first-person-singular narration, along with a subtle music score by CBS staffer Cy Feuer. It stands today as an outstanding example of quality radio drama done on a tight budget. Robson and his crew were craftsmen, and the attention to detail they placed in their work is perfectly showcased in this episode.

The production team assembled by Robson during the early months of *Escape* would remain intact for much of the program's run. Bartell, Van Rooten, Conrad, and Johnstone turned up again and again on *Escape*, along with such outstanding colleagues as Jeanette Nolan, Peggy Webber (below), Lou Merrill, Cathy Lewis, Paul Frees, Barton Yarborough, Parley Baer, and Ben Wright. This acting company was one of the most versatile ever assembled, including masters of every possible characterization and dialect, ensuring that any script, in any setting, could be effectively and convincingly produced. *Escape*, unlike *Suspense* was never a star-driven program, and these actors



Peggy Webber

received billing only at the very end of the program, never gaining the sort of front-ranked attention reserved for big name talent. Toiling in such near-anonymity, for union scale wages, these performers created an impressive and enduring body of work.

Most of *Escape*'s first year on the air stuck close to traditional adventure themes -- but there were hints of more diverse stories ahead. The January 1948 presentation of "Papa Benjamin," adapted from a short story pseudonymously written by *Suspense* favorite Cornell Woolrich, carried *Escape* further into supernatural themes than it had customarily ventured. This was a dark, brooding tale of a failing New Orleans musician who adapts a voodoo chant into

his nightclub musical routine, scoffing at the true believers who warn him that such a profane act would bring terrifying retribution. Cy Feuer's musical score for this episode was especially rich, in a dark, jazzy style that captures the essence of time and place as well as the mood of mounting terror as the inevitable showdown with destiny draws near. A story that might have fit well into *Inner Sanctum*, or any of the horror anthologies of the day, "Papa Benjamin" proved *Escape* capable of chilling spines as thoroughly as it accelerated heartbeats.

Another genre touched upon, and well executed, by *Escape* was science fiction. For years kicked aside as kiddie matinee fare, adult-oriented science fiction became a viable radio format in the early fifties -- due in no small part to the quality productions of science fiction tales on *Escape*. The series dabbled in classic science fiction early on with adaptations from H. G. Wells, but in 1950 it offered several outstanding productions of more modern stories. "Present Tense," from January of that year, offered a disturbing vision of an axe murderer who may or may not be trapped for eternity in a time warp. "Earth Abides," from November 1950, stands as one of the truly great *Escape* tales, a dystopic two-part vision of the collapse of human civilization and the ascendancy of Earth's new masters -- the rats. By this time, Norman MacDonnell, a Robson protégé, had taken control of the series and was leading it even further down the path laid out by its originator. MacDonnell's regime carried over most of the staff from the Robson days, and added several outstanding actors to the program's repertory company, including John Dehner, Lou Krugman, and Larry Dobkin, all of whom turned in first-rate performances in "Earth Abides."

Science fiction, searingly realistic adult westerns, nail-biting espionage thrillers -- all these themes, and many others, characterized the latter years of *Escape*'s unfortunately sporadic run. Perhaps no other radio series offered so wide a variety of stories to its audience while remaining as true to its central theme: "to free you from the four walls of today for a half hour of high adventure!"

### **Track Listing**

#### **CD 1A: An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge - 12/10/1947**

Adapted by William N. Robson from the short story by Ambrose Bierce. Starring Harry Bartell, with Luis Van Rooten, Bill Johnstone, and William Conrad. The last moments in the life of a condemned Confederate sympathizer about to be hanged by the Union Army.

#### **CD 1B: Confession - 12/31/1947**

Adapted by John Dunkel from the short story by Algernon Blackwood. Starring William Conrad and Peggy Webber. A mentally-shattered veteran of the First World War finds terror on a foggy London night.

**CD 2A: Papa Benjamin - 01/21/1948**

Adapted by John Dunkel from the short story by “William Irish” (Cornell Woolrich). Starring Frank Lovejoy, with Joan Banks, Louis Van Rooten, and Harry Bartell. A struggling musician runs afoul of a voodoo curse.

**CD 2B: She - 07/11/1948**

Adapted by John Dunkel and Les Crutchfield from the novel by H. Rider Haggard. Starring Ben Wright, with Berry Kroeger, Kay Brinker, Willis Herbert, and Larry Dobkin. A Victorian explorer travels to a lost African kingdom ruled by an exotic, immortal queen.

**CD 3A: Habit - 07/18/1948**

Adapted by Les Crutchfield from the short story by F. R. Buckley. Starring John Dehner, with Luis van Rooten, Berry Kroeger, Bill Bouchey, and Wilms Herbert. A disgraced sea captain seeks his redemption in the heart of a terrifying storm.

**CD 3B: The Drums of the Fore and Aft - 07/14/1949**

Adapted by Les Crutchfield from the short story by Rudyard Kipling. Starring Ben Wright and Tudor Owen (below). Two young drummer boys are forced to confront their fears under withering enemy fire.

**CD 4A: Second Class Passenger - 07/28/1949**

Adapted by William N. Robson from the story by Percival Gibbons. Starring Parley Baer and Georgia Ellis. An American tourist becomes enmeshed in a web of intrigue while on an ocean cruise.



Tudor Owen

**CD 4B: Command - 12/06/1949**

Adapted by William N. Robson from the story by James Warner Bellah. Starring Elliot Reid. A young officer in an embattled cavalry unit clashes with his by-the-book commander.

**CD 5A: Border Town - 12/13/1949**

Written by Gwen and John Bagni. Starring Jack Webb, William Conrad, Ted DeCorsia, Bea Benaderet, Ben Wright, Jeanette Nolan, Paul Frees, Jerry Hausner, Harry Bartell, and Tony Barrett. Special musical score by Del Castillo. A tired man on a cross-country bus discovers a thick roll of counterfeit bills in his coat pocket...and considers his options.

**CD 5B: Present Tense - 01/31/1950**

Written by James Poe. Vincent Price stars in this disturbing tale of a murderer who relives his crime again and again...and again. Also starring Joan Banks, Harry Bartell, Ben Wright, Charles McGraw, Tom Tully, Paul Frees, and Jeff Corey. Special musical score by Del Castillo.

**CD 6A: Three Skeleton Key - 03/17/1950**

Adapted by James Poe from the story by George Toudouze. Vincent Price stars as the keeper of a remote lighthouse besieged by a relentless army of bloodthirsty rats.



Vincent Price

**CD 6B: Pass to Berlin - 05/19/1950**

Written by Morton Fine and David Friedkin. Starring Peggy Webber and Stacy Harris. An American soldier on occupation duty in Germany finds himself the victim of blackmail.

**CD 7A: Serenade for a Cobra - 06/16/1950**

Written by Joel Murcott. Starring Charles McGraw, Lucille Meredith, Paul Frees, Jay Novello, and Joseph Kearns. A cocky aviator meets his match when a poisonous snake invades his cockpit.

**CD 7B: Earth Abides Part 1 - 11/05/1950**

Adapted in two parts by David Ellis from the novel by George Steward. Starring John Dehner, with Larry Dobkin, Lou Krugman, Parley Baer, Paul Frees, Ron Brogan, and Michael Ann Barrett. A deadly disease wipes out human civilization, leaving a few straggling survivors to rebuild...if they can survive.

**CD 8A: Earth Abides Part 2 - 11/12/1950****CD 8B: This Side of Nowhere - 12/03/1950**

Written by Antony Ellis. Starring William Conrad and Virginia Gregg, with Don Diamond, Lou Krugman, and Ralph Moody. The passengers of a crashed plane escape into the wilds of Mexico with \$250,000.

**CD 9A: A Bullet for Mr. Smith - 01/14/1951**

Written by Antony Ellis. Starring John Dehner, with Jeanne Bates, Ben Wright, Larry Dobkin, Lou Krugman, and Edgar Barrier. An American spy on assignment must kill an enemy agent...once he figures out exactly who it is.

**CD 9B: Lily and the Colonel - 05/03/1953**

Written by John Dehner. Starring Ben Wright, with Paula Winslowe and Lou Krugman. A British colonial officer and his wife must contend with a dangerous native uprising.

**CD 10A: The Far-Away Island - 06/21/1953**

Written by Charles Smith. Starring Ted DeCorsia, Antony Barrett, Edgar Barrier, Jack Kruschen, and Vic Perrin. A fleeing criminal seeks refuge on a remote Pacific island. . .with his own son leading the pursuit.



Betty Lou Gerson

**CD 10B: Flood on the Goodwin - 07/24/1954**

Adapted by James Poe from the story by David Devine. Starring Vic Perrin, with Jack Edwards, Barton Yarborough, Betty Lou Gerson (above), and Eric Snowden. In wartime England, a fleeing Nazi agent makes a desperate escape in a commandeered boat.

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.



[www.RadioSpirits.com](http://www.RadioSpirits.com)

PO Box 1315, Little Falls, NJ 07424

Audio programs are released under license from series rights holders. All rights reserved.  
For home use only. Unauthorized duplication prohibited. Manufactured by Radio Spirits.

Program Guide © 2011 Elizabeth McLeod and RSPT LLC. All Rights Reserved.