

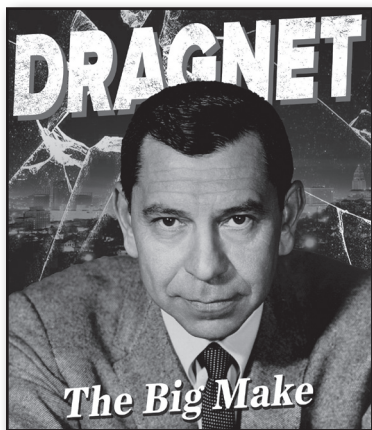
DRAGNET

The Big Make

Program Guide by Elizabeth McLeod

It's a given that long-running entertainment franchises tend to be remembered more as they were at the end than they were at the beginning. And so it is, sadly, that when you mention Jack Webb's epochal police procedural drama *Dragnet* to the average person over forty today, they'll remember it (if they remember it at all) for the send-up movie version with Dan Ackroyd, produced in 1987. If you mention it to someone over fifty, they'll come back at you with snickers about the inadvertent self-parody perpetrated by Webb during the last run of the *Dragnet* TV series in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Oh, you know those shows -- shot on the cheap in lurid Technicolor with flinty-faced Joe Friday, always in that same cigarette-ash-gray sport coat, lecturing some wild-eyed tuned-in, turned-on, and dropped-out hippy about how he'd better listen and listen good, mister. Ha ha, so corny. So out of touch. So dumb.

And that's one of the biggest tragedies in popular culture, because Jack Webb and *Dragnet* were once so much more than corny, out of touch,



and, alas, even dumb. *Dragnet* was once the most provocative radio drama on the air, the most innovative radio drama on the air, the most thoughtful radio drama on the air -- and Jack Webb was one of the great radio auteurs. He was an actor, a producer, and a director who knew exactly what he wanted...and he rode his staff and his cast without mercy until he got it. When *Dragnet* hit the air in 1949, there was nothing else like it, anywhere.

But this *Dragnet*, the *Dragnet* of the summer and fall of 1949, wasn't quite *the* *Dragnet* either. Like any new idea in broadcasting it took some time to gel into its final shape. The earliest *Dragnet* episodes weren't quite there yet -- and it took some time before Jack Webb got exactly what he wanted from the program and its distinctive, inimitable format. It did finally get there, though, because that's where Jack Webb wanted it. And as a generation of radio executives found out, Jack Webb had a way of getting exactly what he wanted.

John Randolph Webb, 25 years old, lately of the U. S. Army Air Corps, didn't seem like a world-changer when he first showed up at station KGO in San Francisco in 1945. At that time, he was just another guy fresh out of the service, just another kid with a vague idea of what he wanted to do in a postwar America that still had no real idea of what it wanted to do other than forget about the war as soon as possible. Webb was a product of grubby Southern California poverty who'd picked up an interest in jazz -- real jazz, the kind you heard on old Bix Beiderbecke records -- from one of the many "boarders" who'd come and gone around his mother's house. Webb thought about jazz all the time -- except when he was thinking about how he might transfer his love for jazz into a way to make a living. He couldn't play an instrument -- but he could talk. He had a distinctive voice with a slight, crinkly rasp to it -- just the kind of voice you might imagine curling smokily out of a radio speaker late at night over a haunting trumpet riff. That's what he ended up doing at KGO -- a platter-and-chatter show that taught him that he still had a lot to learn about radio, and gave him plenty of on-the-job training along the way.

Webb was a quick learner, and it wasn't long before he had a notebook full of program ideas. One was a comedy show, a sort of watered-down approach to the kind of satire Henry Morgan did. ABC gave him a quick shot with this format, but the original Henry Morgan was trouble enough without having to deal with a second-tier imitator. Another idea, though, made an impression. *One Out Of Seven* was an audacious twist on the old *March Of Time* dramatized-news format. However, instead of bringing in a cast of actors to impersonate the newsmakers of the week, Webb did all the voices himself. *One Out Of Seven* had another distinctive

angle as well. In 1946, Jack Webb was far from the staid conservative Establishment figure he would seem to be in the 1960s. Webb didn't just believe in social justice, didn't just oppose racism and bigotry in principle, he was an active fighter. He was a crusader. In 21st Century terms, Jack Webb was "woke." And so was *One Out Of Seven*...perhaps too woke for 1946. The show didn't last long, but while it was on the air, it generated a lot of talk. ABC might have found this particular format too much for their delicate political sensitivities, but Jack Webb had plenty of other ideas in his notebook. He didn't have to be a political crusader to make a splash. He could also sense trends, and he didn't hesitate to jump on them.



Jack Webb

The big trend in postwar radio was detective stories. Mannerly, Ellery Queen-style master classes in deduction were no longer what audiences were after. They were craving the hard-boiled, matchstick-chewing, pistol-brandishing tough private eye stuff. That's what they wanted, so Jack Webb would give it to them...and then some. Enter *Pat Novak For Hire*, radio's most baroque exploration of the world of foggy streets, rainy nights, and seedy waterfront characters. Pat Novak was as hard-boiled as you could get, and so was his prose. Working with writer Richard Breen and director Bill Rousseau, Webb created a world where spines tingled like ice in a glass of cheap Scotch, where women wisped into rooms wrapped only in a notion of a negligee, and so on. Some listeners caught on to the parody elements in Pat Novak's linguistic gymnastics -- others took him straight -- but either way, there was nothing else like him on the air. *Pat Novak* was a big hit on ABC's West Coast network, and its success gave Webb plenty of creative capital. He was ready to spend it on his next big idea.

Police procedurals were nothing new. It was an established genre, which was especially popular on the West Coast, where William N. Robson's seminal *Calling All Cars* was a major success in the 1930s. But Webb had

come up with a distinctive twist on the format. He wanted to tell stories strictly from a police officer's point of view -- with no melodrama, no exaggeration, no super-heroics, and a minimum of gunplay and violence. Jack Webb wanted to show real cops, solving real crimes, the way they really did it -- slowly, methodically, carefully, and scientifically. He didn't want characters that sounded like characters. There would be no place for the bombast of Pat Novak on Webb's new show. He wanted his police officer to sound like a real cop. He'd be a little tired, a little impatient, a little frustrated -- maybe even a little bit bored as he went through his routine -- but nevertheless willing to do the legwork to get the case off the books.

There had never been a police drama like this on radio. Until *Dragnet* made its debut, there'd really only been two kinds of cops on the air: rock-jawed Dick Tracy-like heroes who never made a mistake, and blundering Irish oafs who existed only for some smart-mouthed private eye to come along and show them up. Oh, there were variations on these themes, but those two remained the great police archetypes right up through the end of the 1940s. Jack Webb was determined to change all that. Working with writer James Moser (with whom he'd created *One Out Of Seven*) and director Bill Rousseau, Webb devised a format revolving around an average plainclothes detective. The team enjoyed the cooperation of Los Angeles Police Department Chief Clarence Horall, who needed some good publicity just then in the face of a series of unsolved, gruesome murders. Some weeks Webb's new character would work homicide, some weeks robbery detail, some weeks auto theft or the bunco squad -- but he'd always be the same guy, someone you probably couldn't pick out of the crowd, but who had a relentless dedication to his job. They called him "Joe Friday," and listeners first got to know him over NBC in the summer of 1949.

But he wasn't really *the* Joe Friday, not yet. In his earliest cases, Joe came across as a tough guy with an attitude. He wasn't Pat Novak, by any means, but there was a certain cockiness in the way that he confronted suspects. He was quick to pull his gun -- and there were definitely moments when pulling his gun was appropriate. He was also fast with his fists. He ran around a lot. He yelled. And the program itself didn't sound

quite right. The announcer blared out “DRAAAAGNET!” like he was calling for Jack Armstrong the All American Boy. The opening theme music was a generic “action” theme that conveyed precisely nothing. The sound effects were all right, but could be sharper, more precise. NBC was happy, the critics were impressed, but Webb wasn’t satisfied. He tinkered with the format, tweaking the tone of the dialogue and the style of the announcements, and he brought in composer Walter Schumann to create a memorable opening motif for the music -- an unforgettable, four-note brass-and-tympani overture that commanded immediate attention. Joe stopped yelling. He dropped the cocky, tough-guy attitude. He kept his gun in its holster unless there was no other option. He didn’t wisecrack with thugs. He got serious. He sounded serious. He was serious...because Jack Webb was serious. And the rest of *Dragnet* fell into line behind him. By October of 1949, when Liggett and Myers Tobacco came aboard as sponsor on behalf of Fatima (“best of all lonnnng cigarettes”), *Dragnet* had become, once and for all, *Dragnet*.

And so it would remain, for as long as it ran on radio.

There were still traces of the earlier Jack Webb as the program evolved. The “woke” Webb of 1946 was still there, just under the surface, whenever Joe commented on the conditions in his city that created crime. And the tough-guy Webb of the Pat Novak days occasionally popped up, whenever Joe Friday had need to go undercover -- putting on an uncharacteristic swagger as he popped off around underworld hangouts, demonstrating his street cred as he threatened lesser punks. But in total, the Joe Friday who evolved over the summer and fall of 1949 was the same Joe Friday who continued on radio for the next seven years. Oh, his partners came and went -- Ben Romero died with Barton Yarborough in 1951, and several companions tagged in to solve a few cases before stoic Frank Smith showed up. But the tone that Webb established for the program during its first



L & M Cigarette advertisement featuring Jack Webb circa 1958.



A look inside the studio with Jack Webb and *Dragnet*.

season, once it solidified, stayed solid and only sharpened with the passing of time. The Joe Friday who moved into television in 1951 and continued there for another eight years remained the same man, with the same motivations and the same point of view. Sure, he'd go down that route of ossified self-parody once the new color series came along in 1966, but even then you could see the real Joe was still there, struggling against the trappings of a new era.

Jack Webb was one of the most gifted, most distinctive, most uncompromising actors, directors, and producers ever to work in American radio. And the episodes you're about to hear will show you how he got that way.

DRAGNET

Starring Jack Webb and Barton Yarborough

Written by James E. Moser

Hal Gibney and George Fenneman announcing

Sound Effects by Bud Tollefson and Wayne Kenworthy

Directed by William P. Rousseau and Jack Webb

Produced by Jack Webb

CD 1A: "Police Academy" - 08/25/1949

A young patrol officer begins his career in the midst of a robbery wave.

CD 1B: "Auto Burglaries" - 09/01/1949

Who is Myra, the red-headed leader of a smash-and-grab gang?

CD 2A: "The Sullivan Kidnapping" - 09/10/1949

A girl is held for \$30,000 ransom.

CD 2B: “Cop Killing” - 09/17/1949

Friday and Romero pursue an accomplice in the slaying of a policeman.

CD 3A: “The Brick-Bat Slayer” - 09/24/1949

A blunt-instrument murderer is on the loose.

CD 3B: “The Truck Hi-Jackers” - 10/01/1949

A suspect in a truckjacking dies in custody... and Friday and Romero could be charged.

CD 4A: “The Spring Street Gang”

- 12/01/1949

A juvenile gang experiences the hard side of street life.

CD 4B: “The Jade Thumb Rings” - 12/08/1949

A collector of fine Chinese jade is beaten and robbed.

CD 5A: “The Garbage Chute Murder” - 12/15/1949

Who strangled Laura Barkley?

CD 5B: “The Roseland Roof Murder” - 12/29/1949

A robbery gang kills the manager of a dance hall.

CD 6A: “The Big Smart Guy” - 06/08/1950

A woman dies at the hands of a robber...and Joe and Ben have a strong suspect.

CD 6B: “The Big Purse” - 06/15/1950

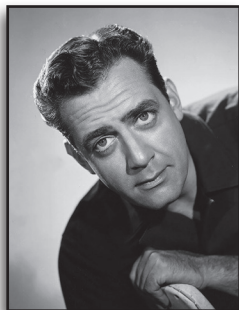
A pair of violent purse-snatchers terrorizes a city neighborhood.

CD 7A: “The Big Grab” - 06/29/1950

A professor’s wife is kidnapped. Friday and Romero hunt her down.

CD 7B: “The Big Frame” - 07/06/1950

A suspect in a hit-and-run case might not be as guilty as he looks.



Raymond Burr is heard as Ed Backstrand, Chief of Detectives.

CD 8A: “The Big Bomb” - 07/13/1950

An explosive may be planted in City Hall. It's up to Joe to find it.

CD 8B: “The Big Youngster” - 08/17/1950

Why is a young boy confessing to a murder he couldn't have committed?

CD 9A: “The Big Chance” - 08/25/1950

A police cruiser is found abandoned on a country road...with no trace of its driver.

CD 9B: “The Big Check” - 08/31/1950

A check forger specializing in small sums racks up a long list of victims.

CD 10A: “The Big Poison” - 09/07/1950

An elderly couple is missing...and an empty cyanide bottle might be a clue.

CD 10B: “The Big Make” - 09/14/1950

A robber shoots the owners of a neighborhood bakery.



Barton Yarborough is heard as
Ben Romero.

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

PO Box 1315, Little Falls, NJ 07424

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