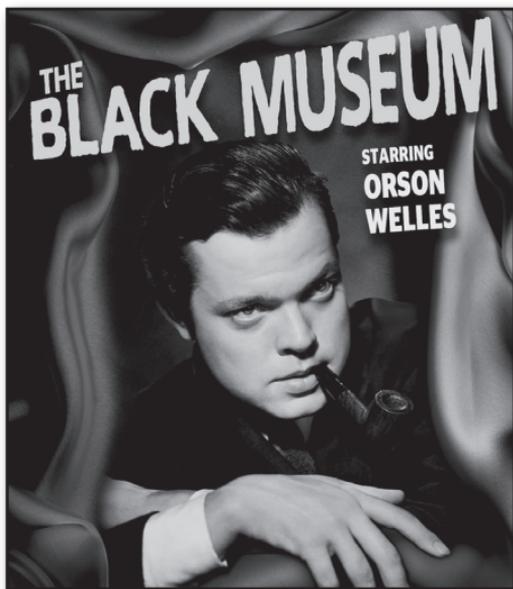


THE BLACK MUSEUM

Program Guide by Karl Schadow

Golden Age radio programs sporting the word ‘museum’ in their titles could be classified into two general groups. There were ventures such as *The American Museum of Natural History* (CBS, 1932-33) and the local Hartford, Connecticut series *Childrens’ Museum of the Air* (WONS, late 1940s). These featured discussions of the institutions’ collections and encouraged listeners to visit their respective establishments. However, the vast majority of the programs that incorporated this term into their monikers were of a musical nature. These included *The Museum of Modern Music* (ABC, 1947) and such local endeavors as *Museum of Melody* (WFBC, Greenville, South Carolina). In addition, Jerry Lawrence (WOR, New York City) and Frank Billings (KGW, Portland, Oregon), among many other platter-spinners, were known for their popular *Wax Museum* sessions. However, there was one radio program of a decidedly morbid sensibility, which featured stories based upon the holdings of material evidence at The Crime Museum of Scotland Yard. Created for police training purposes in 1874, it was purportedly given the ominous name “The Black Museum” by a U. K. journalist in 1875.



In addition to the macabre subject matter, *The Black Museum* is known for the collaboration of two individuals who had a world-wide impact on the entertainment industry: radio and film producer Harry Alan Towers and actor/writer/director Orson Welles. Interestingly, *The Black Museum* was the second of two aural medium enterprises in which this duo participated. The first, which preceded this series by a few months, was the esteemed *The Lives of Harry Lime*.

A native of the London suburb of Balham, Harry Alan Towers (below) began his broadcast career at Radio Luxembourg in 1935 at the age of 15. He later joined the BBC in London as a writer of comedy and musical programs. In 1942, he entered military service with the Royal Air Force and continued his broadcasting activities with the British Forces Overseas Recorded Broadcasting Service. Following the war in 1946, he created (with his mother's financial backing) the radio packaging firm Towers of London, Ltd. The contacts that he had made during the war years helped him to sign such entertainment luminaries as Noël Coward and Gracie Fields. He produced and distributed shows headlined by those stars, and created programs for syndication, including *London Playhouse* (comparable to *Lux Radio Theatre*) and *Secrets of Scotland Yard* (a thriller). Towers succeeded in selling the latter two series to various Australian stations. During a trip to the United States in 1947, he established an office in New York City, entrusting Oliver W. Nicoll (of Radio Features of America) to serve as director.

Following the release of the movie *The Third Man* in 1949, Towers recognized that the film's Harry Lime character presented a grand opportunity for radio. He quickly obtained the rights from creator Graham Greene. The series would star Orson Welles, who had enacted the part for the silver screen version. Towers and Welles had first met in Hollywood in 1946 through a mutual friend, radio writer and producer Fletcher Markle. Episodes of the newly created *The Lives of Harry Lime* were to be recorded in London, where Welles was filming his latest picture: *Othello*. (He was also preparing to star in the stage version of this Shakespeare classic.) The year was 1951 and Welles had achieved tremendous fame in his career. During the previous fifteen years, he had enjoyed triumphs on the stage (Federal Theatre Project's *Macbeth*), on radio (*Campbell Playhouse*), and in motion pictures (*Citizen Kane*).



Harry Alan Towers



Movie poster for *The Third Man*

In North America, *The Lives of Harry Lime* was slated to be released as one of several series distributed by the newly created Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Radio Attractions (MGMRA). In 1949, the motion picture company

had produced its own radio programs, featuring their stars in such endeavors as *The Story of Dr. Kildare* and *The Adventures of Maisie*. These programs were initially broadcast via the studio-owned New York City station WMGM (the former 50 kWatt powerhouse WHN) to compete with network offerings. After the success of these ventures, studio and radio station executives decided that syndication of the programs would generate a desirable profit. WMGM station sales director Bertram Lebhar, Jr. (right) was enlisted as the helmsman of the MGMRA, with the station's Raymond Katz serving as the syndication firm's head of production. To assist in the negotiations with prospective program purchasers, the expertise of talent agency Music Corporation of America was brought on board, with Dave Carpenter from this firm heading the joint venture. Early in 1951, MGMRA successfully contracted with the Mutual Broadcasting System to schedule eight MGMRA series on that network, including its latest acquisition: *The Lives of Harry Lime*.



Bertram Lebhar, Jr.

The Mutual/MGMRA collaboration had been formally sealed, until David O. Selznick (below), former executive at M-G-M and co-producer (with Alexander Korda) of *The Third Man* film, nixed the negotiations. Selznick was not pleased with the usage of the Harry Lime character and retained enough influence at the studio to have the program pulled from the MGMRA set. However, contractual obligations still required MGMRA to provide Mutual with a series featuring Orson Welles. Bert Lebhar turned to Harry Alan Towers, who knew that Orson needed money. Towers masterfully utilized the aforementioned *Secrets of Scotland Yard* (previously released only in non-U.S. markets) as the template for *The Black Museum*. Orson Welles agreed to participate in the venture following his second performance as the lead in the stage production of *Othello*. Signing the contract, he uttered, "The things I do for money," which amused Harry Alan Towers to no end.

An available, experienced script writer was needed immediately. Hired for the position was Ira Marion, who had crafted many installments of the MGMRA series *Crime Does Not Pay* (adapted from the studio's 1930s/1940s two-reelers). As an author for several



David O. Selznick

dramatic series -- including *The Blue Playhouse*, *New World A'Coming*, and *Mr. President* -- Marion had an impressive resume. According to *Radio Daily*, (April 18, 1950), his philosophy on the scripting of crime programs often encompassed society as a whole, with the focus not solely on either the perpetrators or law enforcement.

Orson Welles hosted and narrated each episode of *The Black Museum*. As you listen to the recordings in this collection, note that there are a number of illuminating (though very brief) passages in which Welles interacts with the characters in a manner reminiscent of the initial year of *The Whistler*. Many of The Crime Museum's artifacts profiled in individual episodes were not actual instruments of murder, but items critical to identifying and prosecuting the parties responsible for committing the nefarious activities. Moreover, not all of the cases profiled on *The Black Museum* resulted in convictions. Finally, at the close of each episode, you will hear Orson borrow his 'obediently yours' denouement from the *Campbell Playhouse* series.

Theme and incidental music for *The Black Museum* was composed and conducted by Sidney Torch (below), who was also the musical director for *The Lives of Harry Lime*. Unfortunately, the former program would not have the equivalent of the classic Anton Karas theme enjoyed by the latter. During the 1930s, Torch had been one of London's premier theater organists. On radio, in addition to dramatic programs, he was also the maestro of comedian Allan Jones' variety show -- a Towers entity which was distributed by Lang-Worth Features in the United States. Torch and Towers were well-acquainted, having first met during the war while both were in the service (and where Torch conducted the R.A.F. Concert Orchestra).

Though both the narration and music for *The Black Museum* were taped in London, the dramatic segments were recorded in Australia. The London components were airtailed to Colin Scrimgeour, the Towers of London representative in Sydney, who oversaw the final editing and packaging of each episode. The studios of the Australian Record Company were employed for this purpose, with Creswick Jenkinson (originally from Adelaide, South Australia) engaged as the cue thrower. During the 1940s, he had accumulated



Sidney Torch

experience as an announcer, news reader and sales manager at several Australian radio stations. In 1948, he founded his own production unit. In addition to his directorial duties on *The Black Museum*, Jenkinson also wrote (or co-wrote with Ira Marion) selected scripts of the series, for which he received on-air acknowledgement. Indeed, the closing credits were limited to the script writer(s), Sidney Torch, MGMRA, Harry Alan Towers, and Orson Welles.



Joan Lord

Though no other cast members were recognized during any of the broadcasts, three thespians (who contributed to the international flavor of the series) have been identified (as per press releases in the Australian newspapers, *The Listener* and the *Sydney Morning Herald*). A native of Hamilton (a suburb of Newcastle, New South Wales), Joan Lord (above) was cast in such Australian radio programs



"Harp" McGuire

as *How Green Was My Valley*, the thriller *They Live In Fear*, and the serial *Blue Hills*. Following her appearances in *The Black Museum*, she would co-star as Lady Barbara Wellesley opposite Michael Redgrave in the Towers of London production of *Horatio Hornblower*. Two actors who often portrayed Scotland Yard detectives on *The Black Museum* were Canadian Joe McCormick and the Nashville born Henry Herbert 'Harp' McGuire (above). Both had spent many years in Australia following World War II. Harp McGuire was best-known for his role as Randy Stone in the Grace Gibson production of *Night Beat*.

The Black Museum debuted via the Mutual network on Tuesday, January 1, 1952 at 8 pm Eastern (and on the West Coast at 7 pm). It was broadcast continuously for twenty-six weeks. Replaced during the summer by *The Jimmy Carroll Show*, it would return in the fall for a second cycle of thirteen chapters. Thus, a total of thirty-nine of this program's fifty-two episodes were broadcast on Mutual. During the latter half of the initial twenty-six-week batch, Charles Antell and National Health Aids bankrolled nine episodes (*Sponsor*; May 8, 1952).

The show earned mostly favorable reviews from the critics, with Welles the focus of much of the attention. For example, Herman Schoenfeld (*Variety*, January



Orson Welles

9, 1952) wrote: “Solidly scripted and pervasively performed, this show gets additional horror values from Orson Welles’ portentous narration, which bridges the plot sequences. Welles’ mysterioso gabbing style sets an appropriate clammy atmosphere for this session and the surrounding production succeeds in sustaining the mood.”

Arlene Garber (*TV-Radio Life*, March 14, 1952) had not been apprised of the Australian connection and was generally pleased with the program. She wrote: “With a fine cast of British actors enacting the roles, the script took the listener step by step along with the Scotland Yard men as they solved the case. It was all based upon factual operations not in the least glamorized by detective heroics.” Of the Welles component, she explained that he “would take up the story line with his narration, but this was well placed and served to help the listener understand what was going on without taking the place of action.” Her concluding remarks emphasized: “These ‘Black Museum’ tales will not sound like ‘old stuff’ to you and will offer you a chance to exercise your own intelligence in putting the pieces together in each jig-saw murder.”

While echoing the sentiments of his fellow pundits, Bob Rolontz (*The Billboard*, January 12, 1952) took the program to task. He insisted that it “lacks the one ingredient essential to any whodunit production - suspense.” Additionally, he stated that it “might even be said that there is too much of Welles throughout the stanza, and not enough Scotland Yard.” He was optimistic, however, regarding the future of the series, as suggested by his final comments: “With more imaginative writing, a bit less Welles and musical bridges, this one could measure up to the best of the thrillers.”

Following the show’s short tenure on Mutual, *The Black Museum* was broadcast sporadically, until radio producer/syndicator Irving Feld acquired all of the Towers of London programs in the early 1960s. *The Black Museum* was also aired by the Armed Forces Radio & Television Service in the mid-1970s. The pilot for a television version, entitled *Tales from The Black Museum*, was filmed in 2002 (including narrative sequences from Orson Welles). However, this proposed venture did not advance past the audition phase.

The Black Museum
- Mutual Broadcasting System - 1952

CD 1

A: The .22 Caliber Pistol

B: The Center Fire .32

CD 2

A: The Bathtub

B: The Gladstone Bag

CD 3

A: The Blood Stained Brickbat

B: The Brass Button

CD 4

A: The Weed Killer

B: The Canvas Bag

CD 5

A: The Car Tire

B: The Champagne Glass

CD 6

A: The Hammer

B: The Door Key

CD 7

A: Four Small Bottles

B: The Receipt

CD 8

A: The Glass Shards

B: The Hammerhead

★ ★ ★ ★

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A collection of nooses at
The Crime Museum in London

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A collection of death masks and weapons at
The Crime Museum in London

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If you enjoyed this CD set, we recommend *The Third Man: Lives of Harry Lime*, available now at www.RadioSpirits.com.



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