

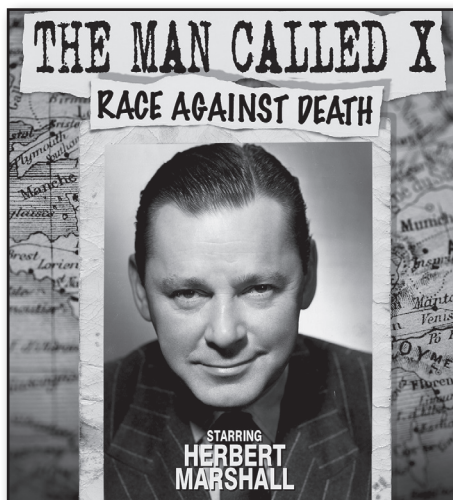
THE MAN CALLED X

Race Against Death

Program Guide by Karl Shadow

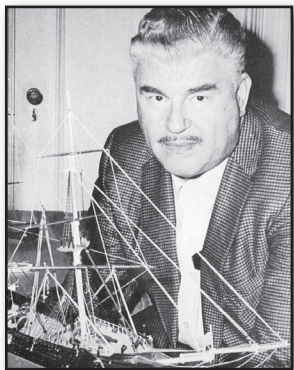
Given the world's political climate in the 1930s and early 1940s, it was no surprise that radio executives offered listeners numerous series of intrigue and espionage. These programs covered a wide range of formats, from juvenile serials such as *Stories of the Black Chamber* and *Dan Dunn Secret Operative 48* to the adult anthologies *Spy Secrets* and *Spy Stories*. To this latter category also belonged the reputable *Ned Jordan*, *Secret Agent*, *Counterspy*, and *The Man Called X*. Initially promoted as a comedy-mystery, the "X" venture evolved into one of broadcasting's more urbane international intelligence shows.

Its own history is worthy of an investigation by the program's protagonist, Ken Thurston. The series' creator, Jay Richard Kennedy, led an extremely colorful life. The Bronx native worked as a farmer, dockworker, and printer, among many other occupations. He was an anti-fascist, who later became a member of the Communist Party. Then, in a complete reversal, he transformed into a staunch anti-communist, which led to employment with the U. S. State Department.



In this role, he wrote a propaganda radio venture that was transmitted to Central and South America. This series, developed for the Committee on Inter-American Affairs, was entitled *El Misterioso...* and would ultimately morph into *The Man Called X*.

Though it first made the rounds of the ad agencies in 1943, it would not premier until July 10, 1944. It was heard on CBS, via its KNX Hollywood studios, as a summer replacement for the second half



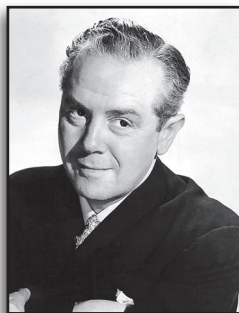
Stephen Longstreet

hour of *Lux Radio Theatre* (Monday, 9:30 pm, Eastern). The original moniker of the program was *A Man Named X*, but this was changed (to its current name) on such short notice that most newspapers and trade publicity failed to make the necessary correction. Interestingly, a review in *Variety* (July 12, 1944) by George Rosen also provided the former title. Not only did the script for this initial broadcast reveal the title change, it also divulged that the series was based on a novel by artist Stephen Longstreet (left), who was also credited as the script author. However, this writer's association with the program ended with the second episode's script. Curiously, creator Jay Richard Kennedy is not credited on either the subsequent broadcasts or in the scripts for this summer cycle, which was sponsored by Lockheed Aircraft Corporation. This advertiser had been a long-time participant in the medium, having recently completed a two-year stint bankrolling *Ceiling Unlimited* (later called *America - Ceiling Unlimited*).

During the opening of each episode of *The Man Called X*, listeners were informed by announcer John McIntire that their hero is the man "who crosses the ocean as readily as you or I cross town...who travels today as you and I will travel tomorrow...who fights today's war in his unique fashion so that tomorrow's peace will make the world a neighborhood for all of us." This individual, code named "Mr. X," was portrayed by Herbert Marshall. By 1944, this major film and stage star had accumulated an impressive radio resume. In addition to numerous appearances on the *Lux* and *Gulf Screen Guild Theatre* programs, he had filled in for Jack Benny and was host of the Armed Forces Radio Service anthology *The Globe Theatre*.

In his escapades, Thurston, residing in New York City, was assisted (but often frustrated) by a small cadre of supporting characters. The first was his fiancée, Nancy Bessington, a newspaper and magazine reporter portrayed by Ge Ge Pearson. Thurston's boss at the unnamed U. S. Government bureau to which he was assigned was known simply as "Chief." This role was performed on a rotating basis by Will Wright, Ted von Eltz and, occasionally, John McIntire. A third character, initially known as Egon Zellschmidt, would gladly offer information...for a price, of course. He was portrayed by Hans Conried during the summer 1944 series. In the first episode of this collection ("Stolen

Diamonds” - 11/25/1944), the name of Mr. X’s adhesive shadow is Zegon Zellschmidt (enacted by Steven Geray [right]). It had been explained in an earlier script of this series (heard on Saturday nights over the Blue Network as of September 16th), that Egon had enlisted in the military but had run afoul of a general and was now serving time in the stockade. Having completed his incarceration, Egon reappears in “Mr. Messler and the Insurance Policy.” A third member of the Zellschmidt clan, Pegon (played by Leon Belasco) was introduced in December 1944 (to replace Zegon).



Steven Geray

The ratings for the initial eight-episode block on CBS exceeded industry expectations, with the program often appearing in the top ten. Lockheed wished to continue sponsorship of its new, successful enterprise. When CBS was unable to provide a satisfactory broadcast time for the fall season, the firm and its ad agency -- Foote, Cone & Belding (FC&B) -- moved their valuable property to a different network. CBS prevented the program’s initial producer/director, William N. Robson, from continuing with the series when it switched networks. Jack Johnstone was enlisted by FC&B to become the new helmsman.

The Blue Network exploits of Mr. X continued through March 5, 1945, when Lockheed decided not to renew the program. The firm’s advertising campaign was moving away from radio and towards print media. FC&B was able to keep the program in-house and shift it to another client. Within a few weeks, the show had been selected by Lever Bros. (for Pepsodent toothpaste) to fill the Tuesday, 10 pm EWT summer slot on NBC for the vacationing Bob Hope. The cast of major players, headlined by Herbert Marshall, was retained for this straw hat cycle, which was comprised of twelve episodes (June 12th - September 4th). The August 14th broadcast was pre-empted for coverage of the Japanese surrender, which signified the end of World War II. As with the previous Blue Network batch, the majority of scripts for the NBC series were written by Milton Merlin. Music was composed and conducted by Felix Mills.

Despite the efforts of Herbert Marshall’s agent, James Saphier, FC&B, and the NBC sales force to procure a new sponsor, the adventures of Ken Thurston remained off the air until the following summer. *Daily Variety* (April 1, 1946) credited Saphier with solidifying a late-hour deal, which gave *The Man Called X* a second round in the Hope Tuesday night niche. Interestingly, this notice in

the trade cited Jay Richard Kennedy and George Corey (New York-based radio writer) as co-owners of the property. It was also one of the initial reports publicly identifying Kennedy with his creation (along with Corey as co-owner).

One of the fourteen installments of the 1946 series, “A Case of Osculation,” is included in this CD set. Two changes are evident in this version of the program. First, there had been some adjustment to the introduction to the Mr. X character, which heralded him as an “international trouble shooter who flies the ocean at the drop of a hat...who charms the ladies, but is death on crooks.” This opening had been instituted in December of 1944 and, at that time, also included this middle shocker: “...who’s had to make love in seven languages to get out of trouble...” (Of course, “making love” had a much different connotation in 1944 than it does today.) Whether this was met with disapproval by Nancy Bessington, or for other reasons, this particular phrase was deleted sometime during the spring of 1945. As to the fate of Miss Bessington, her character was phased out during the summer 1945 cycle and never reintroduced. The reason for this remains to be ascertained, however the change precipitated the program’s evolution from a comedy-mystery to a mystery-adventure.

Herbert Marshall (below) was praised by the critics. According to *Daily Variety* (June 19, 1946), his performance “wraps the role of international sleuth with a high polish and takes the emotional changes in stride.” Also receiving an excellent grade was producer Jack Johnstone (who had continued at the helm during the past two seasons): “...direction was of high order and he kept the show moving smoothly to its suspenseful denouement.” Moreover, there was praise for other crew members: “In a tricky dramatic production of this type, the sound department rates recognition and a commendable job was turned in



Herbert Marshall

by Monte Fraser and Floyd Caton.” Both of these artists had been members of *The Man Called X* team since the fall of 1944. During the 1946 summer session, the NBC studio booth engineer was John Pawlek. Finally, the author and creator also received adulation: “Milton Merlin script was airtight with the storyline contributed by Jay Richard Kennedy, co-owner of the package.” Even though Kennedy was regularly being acknowledged in the press for this role, he would not receive on-air credit until the following season. (His contribution would be articulated in all subsequent episodes.)

There were reports that a new series would begin immediately following the completion of the second Lever Bros.-sponsored session. *Daily Variety* (September 18, 1946) reported that Frigidaire (Frigidaire Division of General Motors Corporation) was going to bankroll the venture. However, the sponsor opted instead to renew its current program, *Hollywood Star Time*. By the spring of 1947, Frigidaire had dropped *Hollywood Star Time* and picked up *The Man Called X*, which returned to CBS on Thursday, April 3rd at 10:30 pm, Eastern. Contained in this collection are three of the first four broadcasts of this season. The maiden exploit, “Antarctic Expedition,” maintained the quality production values that the listening audience had experienced in previous seasons.

With Jack Johnstone being retained as producer/director, CBS staff were employed for technical support, including Al Span (sound patterns), Robert Breckner (associate director), and Mel Noe (engineer). Johnny Green had replaced Felix Mills as the music composer/conductor. His contributions were lauded in a *Daily Variety* (April 4, 1947) assessment: “...musical backdrop was novel, at times steering off from the conventional scoring of dramatic displays.” *The Man Called X* was renewed by Frigidaire and continued throughout the fall and winter seasons, moving to Sunday nights at 8:30 as of October 26th. Though both Herbert Marshall and Leon Belasco (below) received oral curtsies, their fellow thespians remained anonymous. One notable exception was Cathy Lewis, who was acknowledged on-air by Herbert Marshall in “Spirit of the Snows.” (It is worth noting that, in this episode, author Sidney Marshall erred in citing the etiological agent of psittacosis as a virus. It is actually a species of bacteria.) During the 1947 season, a brief moral segment was introduced by Ken Thurston, which would conclude the dramatic portion of each episode.

The Man Called X continued to be renewed by Frigidaire. The enterprise's fifth summer session was applauded by John Crosby (*New York Herald Tribune*, July 9, 1948). He wrote that the program was “possibly the best thing in the lowbrow field of mystery and adventure,” and that the star was “as suave and unraffled a character as you’ll find anywhere on the air.” Radio’s esteemed pundit also had a unique perspective on Mr. X’s adversaries: “...one of the more attractive features of the show is its villains...[they] are as suave and well-dressed as he is, know how to order the proper wine and are in short, as couth a collection of bad men as ever throttled a



Leon Belasco



Milton Charles



Barry Sullivan

millionaire.” As of September 26, 1948, after 78 episodes on CBS, *The Man Called X* would go on hiatus for the next two years. It returned to the air in October of 1950, this time on NBC at 8:30 pm Friday nights. Initially a sustainer, it soon became a key member of that network’s Operation Tandem.

This campaign allowed multiple sponsors to bankroll three different programs each week. In the current set, the firms represented are Liggett & Myers Tobacco Co. (for Chesterfield), Bayer Company (promoting Anacin), and the RCA Victor Division of Radio Corporation of America (various television models). Mr. X was introduced to listeners at the beginning of each of

these installments with the following words: “Wherever there is mystery - intrigue - romance in all of the strange and dangerous places of the world, there you will find *The Man Called X*.” This had been retained from the previous CBS series, where it was first instituted in April of 1947. In the six NBC episodes contained in this broadcast batch, note that full casts are credited (by Herbert Marshall) during the closing announcements. Though Felix Mills had returned to the podium to conduct the orchestra for the 1950-51 season, by the fall of 1951, the program had returned to non-commercial status. Thus, with the concomitant budget cuts, the music was furnished by organist Milton Charles (above).

The final radio adventure of *The Man Called X* was broadcast on May 27, 1952. Ken Thurston's adventures around the globe had transformed during the previous eight years, from fighting the Axis powers of the Second World War to engaging the Communists during the Cold War. Though prospects of a television series were announced as early as 1949 (*The Billboard*, November 19, 1949), and surfaced again a few years later (*Broadcasting Telecasting*, May 12, 1952), a small screen version would not be offered until 1956. The Frederic Ziv Co. produced and syndicated a 39-episode series starring Barry Sullivan (above). Though Herbert Marshall was at an age (65) where a younger personage was required for the television show, his voice would have continued to be a commanding presence had the radio program continued throughout the 1950s.

Episode Guide

Note: All exploits star Herbert Marshall as Ken Thurston. Leon Belasco is featured as Pegon Zellschmidt (with the exception of the “Stolen Diamonds” broadcast).

CD 1A: “Stolen Diamonds” - 11/25/1944

Supporting cast includes: Ge Ge Pearson, Steven Geray, Ted von Eltz, Frank Graham, and Joe Granby.

CD 1B: “A Case of Osculation” - 07/23/1946

Supporting cast includes: Peggy Webber, Joe Granby, Harry Bartell, and Will Wright.

CD 2A: “Antarctic Expedition” - 04/03/1947

Supporting cast includes: Harry Bartell, Thomas Freebairn-Smith, Will Wright, John McIntire and Jeanette Nolan (below).

CD 2B: “Acme Oil Refinery” - 04/17/1947

Supporting cast includes: Bob Bruce, John McIntire, Ted von Eltz, Mary Jane Croft, Eric Snowden, and David Ellis.

CD 3A: “Mr. Messler and The Insurance Policy” - 04/24/1947

Supporting cast includes: John McIntire, Charlie Lung, Bea Benadaret, and Eric Snowden.

CD 3B: “Swindle to Honolulu” - 06/05/1947

Supporting cast includes: Anne Stone, Ted von Eltz, Harry Bartell, Tony Barrett, and David Ellis.

CD 4A: “Assignment -- Naples” - 12/28/1947

Supporting cast includes: Lucille Meredith, Ted Von Eltz, Tony Barrett, and Luis van Rooten.

CD 4B: “Spot the Eight Ball” - 01/04/1948

Supporting cast includes: Ted von Eltz, Alan Reed, Betty Lou Gerson, and Eric Snowden.

CD 5A: “Spirit of The Snows” - 01/11/1948

Supporting cast includes: Cathy Lewis (below), Ted von Eltz, Alan Reed, William Conrad, and Thomas Freebairn-Smith.

CD 5B: “Ranee of Shalakar” - 01/18/1948

Supporting cast includes: William Conrad, Harry Bartell, Ted von Eltz, Frances Robinson, Tony Barrett, Betty Lou Gerson, and Raymond Lawrence.



Jeanette Nolan
and John McIntire



Cathy Lewis

CD 6A: “Race Against Death” - 04/21/1951

Supporting cast includes: Paul Frees, Harry Bartell, Will Wright, Lucille Meredith, Peggy Webber, and Stan Waxman (right).



Stan Waxman

CD 6B: “Terror Across the Nation” - 04/28/1951

Supporting cast includes: Joan Banks, Paul Dubov, Will Wright, Byron Kane, and Lamont Johnson.

CD 7A: “Monte Carlo” - 05/04/1951

Supporting cast includes: Eric Snowden, Will Wright, Ted von Eltz, Tony Barrett, Jane Morgan, Jean Tatum, and Gerald Mohr.

CD 7B: “The Maverick Steer” - 04/22/1952

Supporting cast includes: Will Wright, Herb Vigran, Lamont Johnson, Lucille Meredith, and Bob Griffin.

CD 8A: “Cholera Epidemic” - 04/29/1952

Supporting cast includes: Will Wright, Tony Barrett, Robert Boone, Howard McNear, and Jean Tatum.

CD 8B: “The Desert of Death” - 05/06/1952

Supporting cast includes: Byron Kane, Stan Waxman, Will Wright, Peter Leeds, and Lucille Meredith.

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