

The *Master of Ceremonies*

by Jim Cox

Do you know what entertainer surpassed the storied Arthur Godfrey and everybody else in commandeering the airwaves in total number of hours every week? Be prepared for a surprise: it was the affable, fun-loving, elfin-grinning Bill Cullen, panelist-announcer-quizmaster-DJ extraordinaire. In the 1950s, Cullen showed up for broadcast gigs 25-and-a-half hours weekly, exceeding Godfrey's generous nine-and-a-half hours by 16 every week. Can you top this? Thanks to a disjointed schedule, Cullen allowed: "I'm the only person I know who gets out of bed 12 times a week."

Anybody who remembers Bill Cullen most likely thinks of him as a horn-rimmed glasses-wearing, collegiate-looking, crewcut-sporting toastmaster of television game shows. With no fewer than 36 programs to his credit in that arena, Cullen was an ongoing presence in American households from the late 1940s to the late 1980s. We saw him "more than any other performer in any genre in the history of television" a source affirmed.

Cullen was not only a resident panelist in the 15-year history of *I've Got a Secret* (1952-1967), he arbitrated major contestant sprees like *Down You Go* (1951-1956), *The Price is Right* (in its original format, 1956-1965, most of that with daytime and primetime versions), *Eye Guess* (1966-1969), *Three on a Match* (1971-1974), *The \$25,000 Pyramid* (1974-1979), *Blockbusters* (1980-1982) and *The Joker's*

Wild (1984-1986). There were a couple of dozen more, too, some less-well-remembered, that permitted the gregarious emcee to rise to the top as America's foremost gamesman.

During much of that time, in a variety of formats – and in the years before his omnipresence on the tube – Cullen was a marketable commodity exhibiting mellifluous tones that graced the aural airwaves. Before examining that part of his professional career, an introspective into his triumphs is remiss without surveying his years of training and private life. He was a character that – on the one hand – was widely exposed to all of America while, simultaneously, was steeped in secrecy. On reflection, it seems entirely appropriate that a great deal of his career was devoted to *I've Got a Secret*, for Bill Cullen had a few of those, too.

Seventeen years following his death, some revelations that weren't forthcoming in his lifetime continue to elude his most ardent admirers as well as resolute reporters. Did he earn a college degree? (Even his alma mater isn't talking.) What was his first wife's name? (It persists unrecorded.) Such data is normally readily available from obituaries, informed sources, printed and visual biographies, websites, public and private records. Not so for Cullen.

An only child born into a working class family in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania on February 18, 1920, William Lawrence Francis Cullen was the son of an auto mechanic. The youngster's early life was marred by a couple of tragedies. At 18 months, he developed polio, a dreaded disease leaving him with

a noticeable limp for the remainder of his life. Until the age of 10, in fact, one leg was gripped by a brace. Later, he attempted – often unsuccessfully – to conceal his physical limitation from prying television cameras. He preferred to remain as stationary as possible on show sets, partially hidden by stage paraphernalia. Cullen especially loved *I've Got a Secret* where most of his activity involved sitting behind a panel booth, usually standing only to shake the hands of departing guests. “A good television panelist” said he “is someone who can think on his seat.”

Having overcome most of polio's debilitating scourge, a few years hence – a junior in high school – Cullen was in a catastrophic vehicular accident that landed him in the hospital for nine months. None of this seemed to discourage him permanently, however.

He adopted a lighthearted demeanor, directly opposite the more serious platter life handed him, and passionately engaged in jesting before gatherings of friends. According to a biographer, “He hosted student assemblies, clowned at school spelling bees, organized fund-raising shows and published his own school paper when he disagreed with the policy of the official one.”

In time, he was a pre-med student at the University of Pittsburgh. Needing cash to pay his bills, Cullen was hired at his daddy's garage and became a grease monkey. He tuned engines, changed oil, balanced tires, installed shock absorbers and drove a tow truck. Young Cullen also buttressed

his widening reputation as an amateur talent by impersonating familiar radio performers for shop hands and patrons.

That led to an appearance on an overnight radio show, *The 1500 Club*. It aired on Pittsburgh's low-powered WWSW, boasting a miniscule audience of the city's sleep-deprived and third-shift workers. Cullen was invited back for successive gigs without pay. Finding it to his liking, when a post came open for a salaried announcer, he applied and was hired, soon bringing home \$25 weekly. In the meantime, he was still attending the University of Pittsburgh. No source (including a website devoted to him) assures that Cullen received a degree; several historians speculate that he dropped out.

When the larger and more prestigious KDKA beckoned a while later, Cullen transferred his allegiance. That was the station that, in some ways, gave radio its start. After a brief while the newcomer acquired a coveted prize, hosting a local variety program. Cullen worked alongside a performer who was also destined for greatness in game shows and would probably impact his ambitions. Walt Framer, future creator-producer of one of radio and television's most celebrated audience participation features, *Strike It Rich*, was a KDKA personality. When he blazed a trail to the Big Apple in the early 1940s, Cullen wasn't far behind.

Before that, the pair collaborated on a local audience participation series, *Have You Got It?* With Framer as emcee and Cullen as announcer, its premise was derived from the supposition that—for a few trinkets, a pair of movie tickets

or some silver dollars – people would trade virtually anything of little value they owned. The sidewalk show aired from outside a sponsor’s tiny emporium. Did this series infuse Bill Cullen with visions of grandeur? Perhaps.

In the meantime, with his mother’s strong endorsement, Cullen wed a cousin. Little is known about the liaison that ended in divorce two years later; her name isn’t preserved by media historians. And although his childhood physical impairment kept him off the service rolls during the Second World War, Cullen found a way to become involved. At 15, he earned a pilot’s license, an avocation that netted avid interest throughout life. During the war epoch, he was an instructor and pilot for Civil Air Defense. At 30, in 1950, he opened a flying business on the side, Appointment Airlines. Never successful, that venture went down in flames when Cullen was 32, where he lost about \$30,000.

Even though his contributions at KDKA advanced him to \$300 weekly (\$15,600 annually, superior in almost any profession in 1944), Cullen was restless. Realizing that – after five years – he had reached his potential in that market, he struck out for New York City, hoping to grab the brass ring. It didn’t take long. Hired by CBS as a staff announcer a week after his arrival, he modestly observed: “I only got the job because all the top guys were in the Army.” While he was handling speaking roles with proficiency, during those early days in Gotham in 1945-46, under the tutelage of wordsmith Goodman Ace (of *Easy Aces* fame), Cullen picked up writing assignments, penning a few quips for Jack Benny, Milton Berle, Arthur Godfrey and Danny Kaye. At the same time, he commuted

to Meadowbrook, New Jersey where he was stage announcer for Tommy Dorsey's band at personal appearances.

In the period from the mid 1940s to the mid 1950s, Cullen's name was instantly recognized by home audiences dialing onto network programs on which he was the interlocutor or emcee. In the former category, he announced *The Adventures of Ellery Queen*, *Arthur Godfrey Time*, *Casey – Crime Photographer*, *The Continental Celebrity Club*, *A Crime Letter from Dan Dodge*, *The Danny O'Neil Show*, *Fun with Dunne*, *Give and Take*, *Hollywood Jackpot*, *Laugh of the Party*, *One Night Stand*, *This Is Nora Drake*, *The Patti Clayton Show*, *Sing Along with the Landt Trio*, *Skyline Roof* and *Winner Take All*.

That last of those, incidentally, was Cullen's initial association with Mark Goodson and Bill Todman but by no means was it the last. Their names became legendary in game show production on both radio and TV. *Winner Take All* was their inaugural network feature and when it debuted weekday afternoons on CBS June 14, 1946, it proffered career moves well beyond Goodson and Todman. While Cullen, age 26, was the show's announcer, he frequently substituted as emcee. When Walter O'Keefe left that slot in 1947, Cullen was tapped to succeed him. Cullen subsequently was engaged by Goodson and Todman as host of many ensuing broadcast features over the next four decades.

In the same epoch, Cullen turned up presiding – temporarily or permanently – over a plethora of radio audience participation entries, many of the quiz variety. They included *Beat the Clock*, *Catch Me if You Can*, *Fun for All*,

Hit the Jackpot, Quick as a Flash, Stop the Music!, Strike it Rich, Walk a Mile and Winner Take All. They were, of course, grooming him for what was viewed as the pinnacle of his career, on the tube.

But Cullen wasn't done with radio. Nor with women. On July 30, 1949, he and singer Carol Ames wed. They met when she sang on *Arthur Godfrey Time*, a daily CBS show he announced. The couple resided in an apartment on New York's East side. But that union ended in divorce, too; it lasted to 1955. By then, while commuting back and forth between New York and Los Angeles every week, Cullen met the woman who became the love of his life. On December 24, 1955, he married West Coast model, dancer and TV actress Ann Roemheld Macomber. She, too, boasted an entertainment heritage: she hailed from a family whose patriarch, Heinz Roemheld, was a composer of celluloid music. Her sister was married to Jack Narz, whose younger brother was James Narz, although he applied the pseudonym Tom Kennedy. The Narz boys, natives of Louisville, Ky., became venerated game show hosts, too, presiding over ample numbers of daytime audience participation features on TV from the 1950s to the 1980s.

Cullen and Macomber settled in the Big Apple, sharing an apartment overlooking the East River on East End Avenue at Ninetieth Street. By spring, 1959, they occupied more palatial digs in an apartment overlooking Central Park. The duo was still married to each other at Bill's death. He died of lung cancer at their Bel Air, California home on July 7, 1990 at the age of 70. He had been a

heavy smoker much of his life. Until late in his career, he also resisted a trend among contemporaries to move to the Golden State where more and more work assignments went. Not at least until 1978 did he finally acquiesce.

Back to radio. Cullen experienced a banner year in 1947. In addition to picking up the emcee's duties on *Winner Take All* plus announcing chores on a glut of added audience participation features, he won the role of narrator of a debuting soap opera, *This Is Nora Drake*. There he performed to par, narrating a tale of woe surrounding a beleaguered nurse and a married medic who wed the wrong woman. At the start and conclusion of each installment, he'd shill for the sponsor, the Toni Company, and its women's hair care preparations. On one installment, Cullen read a line of copy that would have gotten the riot act read *to him* if delivered in a more liberated age: "Each month more than a million women use Toni home permanents ... schoolgirls, secretaries, housewives ... women with no more experience or training than *you* have!" Today that remark would be branded ultimate condescension!

Often, Cullen's radio gigs evolved into sheer bedlam. In 1954, for example, as he was shepherding a comeback version of *Stop the Music!* when he interrupted the band to take a call to Mrs. Norma Young, a listener in Kenosha, Wisconsin. The studio audience was particularly boisterous that night, although Cullen's wisecracks provoked much of their unrestrained giddiness:

CULLEN: ...Mrs. Young, I have a question and if you can answer it correctly, I'll send you a \$50 savings bond if you'll tell me the name of the polka

Ray Bloch and most of the orchestra were playing. (*audience responds with guffaws*) You think what? (*chuckles*) ... She says she thinks most of them were playing the "Beer Barrel Polka" and that's right. (*thunderous applause*) If you can correctly identify our "Mystery Melody" you will do better ... You'll win a \$1,000 bond and a trip to Paris ... Listen to this song, Mrs. Young ... Ray, the "Mystery Melody" please. (*orchestra plays a few bars of "Mystery Melody"*) There we are! I'll give you one hint ... The answer isn't "In France They Say 'Oui Oui'" although we know they do. What do you think it is? ... Hunh? What'd you say? ... "In Spain They Say 'Si Si'"? (*pandemonium breaks loose*) That wasn't the right answer, but you'll receive tomorrow by special delivery a \$50 bond and a slightly used banjo. (*audience reacts with gales of laughter*) Thanks for helping us play *Stop the Music!*

Cullen worked at a frenetic pace. While hosting *Stop the Music!* Tuesday nights on CBS Radio, on Wednesday nights he'd appear on NBC Radio as the quizmaster of *Walk a Mile* before lumbering over to CBS-TV for his weekly gig on *I've Got a Secret*. He caught a redeye flight about 11:30 p.m. following that show, arriving in Los Angeles Thursday mornings in time for breakfast, rest and rehearsals for *Place the Face*, another live CBS-TV game show he guided that night. He'd fly back to New York City Friday mornings and preside over NBC Radio's *Road Show*, precursor to *Monitor*, from 2 to 5 p.m. Saturdays. During spare moments each week, he recorded five installments of *It Happens Every Day*

co-hosted with Arlene Francis on CBS Radio, plus he was quizmaster of a televised quarter-hour syndicated quiz, *Professor Yes 'n No*.

A few years hence, in 1958 at what some historiographers think was the apex of his career – possibly based on earnings – Cullen hosted a wakeup radio show, *Pulse*, from 6 to 10 a.m. on WRCA (now WNBC), NBC's flagship outlet. When it left the airwaves every morning, he transitioned from Radio City south to West Forty-Fourth Street where, at 11 a.m. daily, *The Price is Right* emanated from the Hudson Theater over NBC-TV. On Wednesday evenings, he was on the panel of CBS-TV's *I've Got a Secret*; on Thursday evenings, he did an NBC-TV primetime version of *The Price is Right*. In between those features he turned up in guest shots, commercials and syndication. He seemed to thrive on the tempo.

His compensation was commensurate with the energy he brought to his work – and the hectic schedule he maintained while turning up in so many places every week. When *I've Got a Secret* began, Cullen was paid \$200 per show. When it ended 15 years later, he was carrying home almost \$2,000 on that one show, a 10-fold increase.

Pulse and *Road Show* proved a training ground that ultimately thrust him into the air-chair of America's most prestigious aural magazine marathon, *Monitor*, on NBC Radio. On Saturday afternoons between 3 and 6 p.m. in 1971, 1972 and part of 1973, he interviewed guests, spun records, queued up features and carried listeners around the globe for instant news where it happened.

Calling him “the ultimate host,” Dick Clark – who, from 1972-88, ran one of those network game shows that Cullen inherited in syndication, *The \$25,000 Pyramid* – cited his proclivity for “making this job look easy.” Groucho Marx, meanwhile, the irascible quipster-host of *You Bet Your Life*, dubbed Cullen “the second-wittiest man in the business.” And fellow game showman Bob Eubanks branded Cullen as “my hero” to his face. Producer Mark Goodson viewed him as “a perpetual little boy,” a man with “great curiosity” who was “extremely adept at the rather complicated business” of hosting game shows. “He has an adept sense of format,” Goodson once said of Cullen. “He remembers names, scores and such details. He also has a remarkable sense of free-wheeling association that lets him talk his way out of or into any situation that arises.”

Cullen retired from television after *The Joker’s Wild* departed the airwaves in 1986. His last appearance, a week-long guest shot in June 1987, occurred on one of his former series, *The \$25,000 Pyramid*. “Bill finished out his career by returning to his old stomping grounds, radio,” noted one observer. “He became the spokesman for the National Society for the Prevention of Blindness in a series of public service announcements.” He also hosted a couple of syndicated radio segments, one focused on child-raising (a surprising arena for a guy without kids) and the other show offering photography tips to beginners. He had been a shutterbug all his life and could communicate first-hand knowledge there.

We noted that Cullen possessed secrets that have never been exposed. One, apparently, was how his incredibly youthful appearance carried beyond the

grave. According to Regis Philbin, nine years following Cullen's death, his name came up for serious consideration by the producers of *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?* as that show headed to TV in 1999. "Of course, such talk ended after they found out Cullen was deceased," Philbin – who was ultimately tapped for the role – explained. Cullen was youthful to distraction.

In 2004, a nonprofit enclave promoting the trade, the Game Show Congress, created a Bill Cullen Career Achievement Award to be given annually to performers with distinguished careers in its industry. Ann Cullen was on hand to accept the initial presentation, given posthumously to her late husband.

Despite all the sustained acclamation his tube presence generated, Cullen told a reporter on one occasion: "I always wanted to be in radio. It's a romantic, desirable gold mine. Can you tell me an easier way to make a living?"

This jack of all trades was incontrovertibly the master of some.

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