

Drama! Thrills! Action! **FBI Narrative Proffers Convincing Pretense**

by Jim Cox

Given what one historiographer cited as “a sassy treatment” by a full orchestra, the march from Sergei Prokofiev’s *Love for Three Oranges* furnished one of radio’s most distinctive musical themes. For 14 years—much of that epoch transpiring during the uncertain days of network radio’s receding tide in the 1950s—with practiced resolve, that memorable signature opened and closed one of the medium’s most enduring nighttime crime-fighting features. Signaling new episodes of *The FBI in Peace & War*, Prokofiev’s classical work was a weekly reminder to ethereal addicts that radio drama was still alive and thriving. As the years rolled by the series persisted in leaving an indelible imprint on a vast listening audience. Although it eroded in numbers toward its conclusion, and there were some repeated episodes occasionally, those audio narratives provoked a high level of abiding interest on the part of the faithful.

Together with compelling commercials for its original underwriter (supplied by a deep baritone voice with bass drum accompaniment in an echo chamber as it rhythmically boomed out L-A-V-A! L-A-V-A!), tales of “the Bureau” were ushered onto and off the ether every seven days. All of this falderal set the tone for the gripping, albeit by and large mythically embellished exploits that its billboard surrounded. Assurance that it was “Another great story based on Frederick L. Collins’ copyrighted book, *The FBI in Peace & War—Drama! Thrills! Action!*” seemed to verify its authenticity for many. That epithet, another piece of the habitually articulated framework interjected into the start of each installment, was offered by a surfeit of veteran interlocutors. At varying times their deputation included Andre Baruch, Hugh Holder, Dick Noel, Len Sterling and Warren Sweeney.

Yet it was the stories themselves for which the masses waited with rapt anticipation. They certainly *sounded* believable, even if their detail had been stretched to the limit or—as was often the case—fabricated altogether. Adept wordsmiths beyond Collins included seasoned scribes like Ed Adamson, Jack (Jacques) Finke, Louis Pelletier and a few more of their creative ilk. Individually and often collaboratively they fashioned tales that were absorbing and pleasing to what may be characterized as sensory and sensual perceptions. Only about a dozen accounts from Collins’ book were incorporated into the radio dramatizations; thereafter, Collins received name recognition on the air and \$50 in royalties per week even though somebody else was devising the scripts.

The yarns were not only intriguing but also gratifying. Invariably the forces of goodwill outsmarted the typical petty larcenists, swindlers, racketeers,

heisters, shysters, carjackers, embezzlers, and others of myriad persuasions. Populating the scripts with unscrupulous designs, they could be reckoned with possessing greed to humongous degrees. As they schemed to turn a few bucks through nefarious methods that ran afoul of the law, the FBI was soon in hot pursuit, tracking them to their predictable dismal ends.

Murder and espionage weren't prominent themes here. Those were usually left to the named nocturnal radio detectives (*David Harding, Counterspy; Mr. Keen, Tracer of Lost Persons; Mr. Chameleon; Mr. and Mrs. North; et al.*). But when it came to old-fashioned theft, forgery and insurance fraud, *Peace & War* possessed a whole block of real estate. Titles of typical episodes were succinct and intriguing: "The Traveling Man," "Top Man," "No Insurance," "The Bungler," "The Fixer," "The Newspaper Man," "The Royal Treatment" and "Retirement Plan."

The FBI in Peace & War bowed at 8:30 p.m. over CBS on Saturday, November 25, 1944 with a performance of "Johnny the Wise." The series' debut occurred in the midst of the halcyon days of listeners' long love affair with chain broadcasting. The FBI drama joined a glut of crime-oriented programming that drew large numbers to their sets virtually every weeknight.

A study a few years ago of crime-fighting fare offered to aural-only audiences in 20th century America revealed that in excess of 300 such series were beamed across the airwaves. They were offered by networks and in syndication on a regular basis. They included figures operating in both vocational and avocational capacities. Upholding the nation's defenses, the features collectively embraced private detectives, police officers, government agents, western lawmen,

amateur sleuths and still more classifications, all with a predilection for crime prevention. *Peace & War* became an integral part. By September 28, 1958, when it departed the air for the final time, the show was one of few to have persisted that long and that late in the enduring legacy of popular audio amusement.

In the first half-dozen years of airing those tales of lawbreakers, Procter & Gamble Company (P&G) determined that the property was a wise investment for reaching a perceptibly masculine-dominated audience. With frequent results of the extraordinary power of its Lava hand cleanser applied in audible soap-and-water comparative test “demonstrations,” P&G persuaded millions to try Lava for themselves. As the firm extolled the virtues of its foaming gray pumice-laden bar for clean-up following “extra dirty, greasy, grimy” jobs, it made a clear distinction that dainty ladies’ perfumed hand soaps simply wouldn’t do. Sales of the heavy-duty product soared, and *The FBI in Peace & War* could be credited with much of the uptick.

Prokofiev’s haunting theme played right into P&G’s hands and re-enforced what was reverberating out of the echo chamber with the repetitious chanting L-A-V-A! L-A-V-A! The marching music led directly into the trio of acts of the weekly storylines. When P&G was satisfied that it had achieved its mission and dropped sponsorship of the show on December 28, 1950, *Peace & War* didn’t delete its familiar opening and closing. By then that overture was received as a well-established audio commodity. Parenthetically so accepted was it that it had been recorded and published independently as “The FBI March” and a solo piano arrangement by John W. Schaum was also marketed. Nevertheless, while many longtime listeners might still be thinking L-A-V-A and possibly even sounding it

out during new commercials, prospective underwriters stood in line for a chance to fill the void with pitches for other products.

As the decade progressed the same *Love for Three Oranges* march continued to identify the drama that was such an integral part of CBS's weekly lineup and remained so for another eight years almost. Ads for men's Wildroot Cream Oil and Brylcreme hair grooming preparation frequently supplied the gap created by the loss of Lava. In an era in which multiple participation of advertising in programming became the rule rather than the exception, alongside the hair care providers were Lucky Strike cigarettes, Nescafe instant coffee, Wrigley's chewing gum, Wheaties cereal, CBS Radio and others. Even when the chain carrying the show didn't profitably sell that time, to its credit it consistently offered the absorbing dramatic action without interruption.

Peace & War continued to provide enthralling tales marked by quality writing, directing and technical assistance. Further complementing it was a laudable coterie of skilled aural actors in an East Coast repertory company that appeared on scads of dramatic aural fare from New York. On a regular basis supporting roles were filled by well-tested thespians like Edith Arnold, Charita Bauer, Jackson Beck, Ralph Bell, Joe DeSantis, Robert Dryden, Elspeth Eric, Walter Greaza, Larry Haines, Pat Hosley, Harold Huber, John M. James, Paul McGrath, George Petrie, Frank Readick, Rosemary Rice, Grant Richards, Bob Sloane, Wilson J. Smith, and Luis Van Rooten.

Only a couple of individuals have been identified as *Peace & War's* enduring producer-directors, hinting at the continuity afforded over its lengthy run. In the first five years the series was on the air (hardly considered "seasons"

as on some shows for it usually offered fresh scripts 52 weeks a year during most of the run without extensive summer breaks), Max Marcin held the reins as producer-director. He was a radio veteran who produced and scripted CBS's *Crime Doctor* (1940-47). Marcin's efforts there were celebrated in 1945 when that series was officially re-dubbed *Max Marcin's Crime Doctor*.

On *Peace & War*, when he departed in 1949 for other challenges, his slot was filled in unique fashion for that time. For the very first and apparently only time during the golden age of network radio a woman was appointed producer-director of an evening crime thriller. Betty Mandeville was one of several people already working the same responsibility on radio's *Take It or Leave It* game show (later known as *The \$64 Question*), a run extending from 1940-47 on CBS and 1947-52 on NBC. During *Peace & War's* final nine years Mandeville remained securely in place at the helm of its time-honored exposition.

Born in Minneapolis on June 18, 1910, she had risen through backstage programming at CBS. She was viewed at age 39 as a rising "star" albeit one behind the scenes as she came to the forefront for that imposing duty. Had radio's fortunes not faded in the decade of the 1950s, Mandeville's future in the medium might have been assured based on her enduring tenure with *Peace & War*. All that came to ignoble ends, of course, as the series was brushed aside late in 1958.

For several years it had succeeded against formidable odds evidenced by the cancellation of a large number of longrunning contemporary crime-fighters: *Boston Blackie*; *Casey, Crime Photographer*; *Charlie Chan*; *The Fat Man*; *The Falcon*; *Gangbusters*; *Mr. and Mrs. North*; *Mr. District Attorney*; *Mr. Keen*,

Tracer of Lost Persons; Official Detective; Sam Spade; The Shadow; Sherlock Holmes; The Thin Man; The Whistler; Nero Wolfe; and many, many more. Betty Mandeville herself passed from the scene at Henderson, North Carolina, on June 14, 2001. She was then just four days shy of her 91st birthday.

While most of the men and women who were responsible for the success of *Peace & War* have been introduced, the duo that played the true stars of the unforgettable narrative hasn't been. Both were imaginary members of the Federal Bureau of Investigation force and were pivotal to the drama's sequences. Surprisingly, in the storyline one was devoid of a given name. The key player was field agent Adam Sheppard, portrayed by aural thespian Martin Blaine. Busy radio actor Donald P. Briggs appeared as the other key figure, field agent supervisor Andrews (sans other nomenclature). The copious striking parallels between the two men in real life are almost uncanny, however. Blaine and Briggs were in their respective roles at the series' inception and were still there for the feature's final performance nearly 14 years and almost 700 installments later, a rather unique circumstance in the annals of crime dramas. That was but the beginning of the resemblances between them nevertheless.

Both were born in Chicago; they moved to New York, and then to Los Angeles. Briggs was the senior member of the pair by almost 33 months. He succumbed to death about 35 months before Blaine's demise. Both actors died in California at 75. Both acted professionally under assumed names (pseudonyms). Both pursued a litany of jobs that carried them from stage to radio to screen to television. How many similarities might be found among colleagues playing in lead roles on a longrunning radio series that equaled those of Blaine and Briggs?

The surprises in one of their lives don't end there. On February 27, 1971 at age 57 Blaine wed Elizabeth H. Pelletier, 47, in Los Angeles. If her surname is familiar it should be. Six months prior to this she divorced Louis Pelletier after a 21-year marriage. He was *that* Pelletier who—with Jack Finke—turned out in excess of 500 scripts for *Peace & War*. After his long run with radio Pelletier (1906-2000) penned the screenplays of five profitable 1960s family films: *Big Red*, *Those Calloways*, *Follow Me Boys*, *Horse in the Gray Flannel Suit*, and *Smith*. In the capstone of his career Pelletier taught his craft at various colleges, mentoring future motion-picture screenwriters.

On *Peace & War*, Martin Blaine (in real life Martin S. Pollock) played the leading character of Adam Sheppard. Born in Chicago October 18, 1913, he was of Jewish ancestry. Both parents were immigrants: his father was Scottish, arriving in this country at 15 in 1906; his mother, Russian, arriving in 1895 at age four. They wed in the Windy City in 1909 and later relocated to New York. At 19, their only child Martin was an apprentice at famed Eva LeGallienne's Repertory Theater. That same year (1932) the teen appeared with Miss LeGallienne in "Liliom." He performed in subsequent productions of "L'Aiglon," "My Heart's in the Highlands," "The Man Who Killed Lincoln," "Summer Night" and "Listen, Professor," most with brief runs. He played alongside celebrated actress Ethel Barrymore in a 1940 production, *Embezzled Heaven*.

In the meantime Blaine was already creating a radio legacy (from 1931) that prevailed for three decades. His aural acting credits embraced *American Portraits*, *The Big Show*, *Cavalcade of America*, *Command Performance*, *Crime Doctor*, *Indictment*, *Katie's Daughter*, *Mr. Keen—Tracer of Lost Persons*, *The*

Open Door, The Strange Romance of Evelyn Winters, Valiant Lady, Words at War, Young Doctor Malone and *Yours Truly—Johnny Dollar*. His filmography cites a trio of unmemorable pictures between 1964 and 1966 (*A Global Affair, The Lively Set, The Satan Bug*) plus one redeeming movie (*The Fortune Cookie*).

From the late 1950s through the 1960s Blaine won single or recurring parts in varied dramatic TV fare: *The Alfred Hitchcock Hour, Ben Casey, Bonanza, Burke's Law, Days of Our Lives, Grindl, Gunsmoke, Hogan's Heroes, The Invaders, Judd for the Defense, The U. S. Steel Hour, The Wild Wild West* and *Young Doctor Malone*. In 1954, after obtaining a patent for an inflatable plastic beach ball global map trademarked Atlasphere, the actor established Blaine Company, Inc. At 130 West 42nd Street in New York, the firm manufactured, distributed and marketed his entrepreneurial educational diversion. The *Peace & War* lead lived to January 19, 1989 and died in a car crash at Cambria, California. In 2006, *Mr. Dooley's America*, a play that Blaine and Philip Dunne co-wrote in 1976, received sensational reviews after New York performances by the Irish Repertory Company.

Donald P. Briggs, FBI field supervisor Andrews in the radio show, was born in Chicago January 28, 1911 (as Lester B. Sprawls). Initially a brokerage salesman, he focused the bulk of his professional career on performing. Aside from introducing *The First Nighter* to listeners, in the 1930s and 1940s his work was heavily concentrated in recurring parts on a string of daytime serials: *Betty and Bob, David Harum, Girl Alone, Hilltop House, Life Begins, Perry Mason, Portia Faces Life* and *The Story of Bess Johnson*.

A versatile utility player, Briggs turned up almost routinely in single shots on *Columbia Workshop*, *Dick Darling's Adventures*, *Grand Hotel*, *Mark Chase*, *Mr. Feathers*, *Mr. Keen*, *The Sheriff*, *True Detective Mysteries*, *Welcome Valley* and still more radio features. He was the lead on *City Desk* and announced *The Chase & Sanborn Hour* one season. Briggs and his wife, actress Audrey Christie, appeared in supporting roles on *The Couple Next Door*. From 1942 to 1945 he co-produced radio's *The Army Hour*.

For four decades (1936-76) Briggs was typecast as a suave sinister villain in 37 Hollywood B-films. He left the screen for Broadway, summer stock and touring, ending his career as an actor in multiple early video projects: *Cameo Theater*, *I Love Lucy*, *Pulitzer Prize Playhouse*, *Robert Montgomery Presents*, *Studio One*, *Suspense*, *Tales of Tomorrow* and *The Web*. He also introduced the early TV and radio versions of *What's My Line?* Briggs died of cancer in Los Angeles February 3, 1986.

Like the two leading actors in the drama for which he became legendary, Frederick L. Collins—the man who launched the epic drama by penning his infamous “copyrighted book”—also made it a practice to perform some of his best work incognito. Born Frederick Lewis in 1882, “Collins” wrote under his pen name when G. P. Putnam's sons published his FBI exposition in 1943. That tome joined a handful of volumes that the wordsmith released in the early decades of the 20th century: *This King Business: Intimate Accounts of Royalty* (1923), *Travel Charts and Travel Chats* (1926), *Glamorous Sinners* (1932), and *Money Town: The Story of Manhattan Toe, the Golden Mile Which Lies Between the Battery and the Fields* (1946).

An oft-quoted exclamation that has little to do with his writing exploits but may outweigh most of his sterling achievements as a print journalist was attributed to Collins: “There are two types of people—those who come into a room and say, ‘Well, here I am!’ and those who come in and say, ‘Ah, there you are.’”

Thirteen years following Collins’ death at 68 in 1950, Putnam re-released his most fêted work. The “new” text was touted as a “revised and enlarged edition” of *The FBI in Peace and War*. Whoever modified it (likely some hack in Putnam’s employ) wasn’t credited for his efforts. All of the original account is believed to have been the imagined fabrications of one man, derived out of fodder supplied by the FBI’s Crime Records Division. If that tradition prevailed, the latter entry might have grown to limitless proportions, depending on the inventiveness of an expansive mind. The final form is 320 pages in length.

Some listeners to the radio manifestation with premise based upon the 1943 book may have assumed that they were hearing dramatizations derived from actual files of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. In the main nothing could have been further from the truth even though the assignment of the FBI agency was the basis for the radio incarnation. Even though the program consistently painted the organization and its representatives in a favorable light (it never cast aspersions on personnel or denigrated the feds’ sworn duty to uphold the laws of the land, for instance), FBI director J. Edgar Hoover was not a happy camper. He never warmed to the show, seemingly perceiving it to be almost adversarial in nature, virtually as if the saga that held his forces in high esteem was working against them.

His difficulty with this and a few more radio series with the FBI at their core (e.g., *Agent K-7*, *G-Men*, *Gangbusters*) was motivated by the fact “they traded on the fame of the FBI but had no authorization from the Bureau to do so,” an informant allowed. Jack French, a venerable old time radio scholar and retired FBI agent, summarized mitigating factors that agitated Hoover and in so doing established the Bureau’s stance:

“During World War II the FBI provided a large amount of summaries of closed cases ... to author Frederick L. Collins, who had an agreement with the Bureau to write a book on their exploits. The book ... quickly became a bestseller. The resultant success made Hoover and the FBI happy and the royalties made Collins even happier.”

French continued: “Collins took the book to CBS to promote it as a new radio series. As soon as the FBI got word of this, they protested to CBS that Collins had no authority to market his book about the Bureau for broadcast purposes. They claimed that his access to FBI summaries (which they had furnished) was for the sole purpose of writing his book, and no radio rights were given or implied. CBS and Collins put the matter to Hoover’s superiors at the Department of Justice. Hoover was overruled ... and the CBS radio series, using the title of Collins’ book, was launched....”

French concluded: “One may speculate on what was more galling to Hoover and the FBI, the fact that an author had outfoxed them and obtained a successful radio series, or the fact that most of the listening public thought the program was sanctioned by the FBI.” The Bureau, by and by, did respond in its own way, encouraging, endorsing and cooperating with producers at ABC Radio

on a rival series, *This Is Your FBI*. That dramatization ran on Friday nights from April 6, 1945 to January 30, 1953. While it drew a devoted following, the feature never seriously eclipsed the colossal acclaim that the Collins-inspired entry achieved. That too must have festered in the craw of J. Edgar Hoover.

To those whose responsibility was to deliver an entertaining series weekly that proffered some semblance that its scripts were based on fact, Hoover's expressed grimace must have seemed counterproductive, ill-advised and without merit. Fans who listened intently, of course, heard the drama's announcer state every week that "any similarity to persons living or dead is purely coincidental." It was a tagline adopted by a glut of crime shows of that era. If the most loyal aficionados realized that what they were hearing wasn't a bona fide dramatization drawn from fact, they might have been disappointed. In reality, after all, for a half-hour every week they were being duped as very little or nothing about what they were exposed to was real. Recall that even the show's key players and the guy who set it all in motion went under the guise of aliases!

Despite all of this it was difficult not to be swept into the emotion of those transfixing tales because—if nothing else—they *seemed* believable! And make-believe could be a rewarding dalliance in itself. After so many episodes of *The FBI in Peace & War* the true addicts may have tossed that idiom aside about persons "living or dead" being "purely coincidental" and acted as if they had never heard it.

The drama, thrills and action of the FBI narrative proffered some convincing pretense. For 14 years Americans tuned in to see how the Bureau's agents would catch another thief—just like the G-Men who were doing it in real

life. And at the time J. Edgar Hoover might have been the only man in America who didn't enjoy a good charade from the land of make-believe.

Contributing to the research for this material was Irene Heinstein.

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