

# Perry Mason, Aural Barrister

by Jim Cox

In its halcyon days, the award-winning CBS Television courtroom drama *Perry Mason* starring Raymond Burr as the infamous witness-stand-revelation defense lawyer drew millions of viewers every week (1957-66). Nevertheless, possibly only an infinitesimal number of those fiercely loyal fans were aware that – for a dozen years prior to the counselor’s inception in a visual manifestation – he was a popular figure five days a week in an aural matinee melodrama. In fact, a potent argument can be proffered that the daytime drama surpassed anything on TV for its power to spellbind an audience.

From October 18, 1943 to December 30, 1955 the unconventional defense attorney enthralled a vast audience of homemakers – largely feminine – plus a worthy number of males who were available to tune in for some matinee mayhem. It was unlike anything else on the dial at that hour for it purveyed a particularly chilling effect on its listeners. Furthermore, the habitual reminder from an announcer at the end of every episode to “tune in again tomorrow, won’t you?” seemed utterly superfluous. Mesmerized fans had little choice but to be on hand for the next installment of the gripping saga. It was, most often, *that* compelling.

Before exploring the radio incarnation in greater detail, a little Perry Mason history is in order.

The origins of the crusading attorney date from a decade before the radio incarnation when real defense lawyer Erle Stanley Gardner turned his attention to writing fiction as a moneymaker. The first of more than 80 Mason novels was published in 1933 titled *The Case of the Velvet Claws* (Grosset & Dunlap) with a cover displaying these immortal words: “Perry Mason—criminal lawyer. Remember that name. You’ll meet him again. He is going to be famous.” The copywriter who penned that piece of marketing verbiage had keen insights.

But Gardner was publishing extensively before that. In the 1920s he wrote fiction for *Black Mask*, a popular pulp detective magazine. By 1925 he created a series of stories based on a mythical character that he labeled *Ed Jenkins, Phantom Crook*. He persevered as a *Black Mask* contributor for two decades. He was to author legions of added fiction tomes later, frequently featuring a detective, a lawyer or a combination of the two. His works often appeared under the pseudonyms A. A. Fair, Charles M. Green, Carleton Kendrake and Charles J. Kenny. Between 1939 and 1970, for example, he published 29 mystery novels as A. A. Fair that cited the detective team of Donald Lam and Bertha Cool.

Born at Malden, Massachusetts on July 17, 1889, Gardner grew up in multiple Oregon mining towns before graduating in 1909 from Palo Alto High School near San Francisco. Although he was dismissed from Valparaiso (Indiana) University for fist-fighting, he was nonetheless admitted to the bar without formal instructions in 1911 after merely typewriting for a living in a California law office. Gardner hung out his shingle at Merced afterwards and then worked for a corporate attorney at Oxnard (1911-

18). He tried sales from 1918-21 but returned to law, practicing a dozen years at Ventura (1921-33). By then he was heavily subsidizing his income with pulp writing, earning a penny per word for fiction in the Depression epoch that he sold to *West Weekly*, *Western Round-Up* and *Western Tales* magazines. He published 144 short stories and 301 novelettes by 1934.

The appearance of Mason in 1933 caught on with the public who were fascinated by the tales of the mythological criminal lawyer's ability to separate truth from illusion. The stories became so popular so quickly that Tinseltown took notice. Warner Brothers purchased the film rights to several of the Mason volumes. At least three were produced in quick succession, each with a different actor playing Mason. All of them flopped: *The Case of the Howling Dog* (1935 with Warren William), *The Case of the Black Cat* (1936 with Ricardo Cortez) and *The Case of the Stuttering Bishop* (1937 with Donald Woods). "Gardner never forgave Hollywood," a critic pontificated.

The books, on the other hand – which Gardner had ultimate control over – kept coming, and a grateful public kept reading. He released new ones until his death on March 11, 1970 at Temecula, California. Successors of his estate continued to create new volumes following his demise.

In the meantime, in 1943 the Procter & Gamble Company was seeking something different to offer milady in weekday radio to increase the sales of its perfumed toilet soap, Camay. Someone suggested developing a daytime serial drawn from the popular novels and short stories that Erle Stanley Gardner was releasing and centered on the fabled imaginary criminal lawyer Perry Mason. While this would be a departure from every other drama offered on CBS, the idea clicked and CBS offered P&G a quarter-hour slot Monday-through-Friday at 2:45 p.m. Eastern Time. (The program shifted to 2:30

p.m. in 1944. It permanently transferred to 2:15 p.m. in 1945.) Actor Bartlett Robinson was engaged to portray Mason in the debuting drama with actress Gertrude Warner playing Della Street, Mason's confidential secretary. Matt Crowley originally won the part of private investigator Paul Drake while Mandel Kramer was hired to appear as police lieutenant Arthur Tragg. Those recurring roles were to be recast at least once over the 12-year run and some multiple times. A strong supporting stable of New York aural actors complemented the contributions of the regulars.

At the narrative's start, Erle Stanley Gardner wrote the scripts himself. In those pioneering days, the format more closely paralleled what the TV version was to become than at any other time for it was prepared in titled sequence, a Gardner trademark. The premier story was labeled "The Case of the Unwanted Wife." But it was soon evident to everyone, including Gardner himself, that he didn't possess the credentials and possibly the stamina to pull off a grueling pace of five shows weekly for 52 weeks per year. Others were brought in to pick up the slack.

Most likely two of the best things that happened to the show in its radio incarnation occurred within a few months of one another. In the fall of 1946, Irving Vendig arrived. He was a man whose inspired scripts turned the series into a work of magnetic art. The concept of the titled case format was virtually abandoned; Vendig's terrifying tales had the listeners descending to deeper and deeper levels of intrigue, allowing them to linger as new details surfaced which made turning the dial totally impossible for most addicts of the series. As opposed to the murder mysteries subsequently solved in the tele-version in an hour, Vendig's audio Mason might mete out one storyline for as long as 18 months. Another big difference characterizing his narrative was the fact the audience almost always knew up front who the bad guy was

and what he was capable of doing to a witness or potential victim. Some culprits had killed already and wouldn't hesitate to do so again, provided they could locate a hunted figure before Mason found him or her. It was imperative that the inveterate protector ("defender of human rights ... champion of all those who seek justice") locate an individual in hiding before the mob or a crazed murderer struck first.

By the late 1940s the serial hit its stride. The central character had gradually developed into one whose prolonged yet absorbing action-packed exigencies caught the fancy of hordes of followers. Vendig's central figure dispelled the old wives' tale that most men on radio soap operas were weaklings. The crusading attorney was brilliant—cool, calculating, a good match for even the most formidable foe who challenged good with evil. Mason was also attractive to the housewives. Exploits of the dashing, brilliant young lawyer gave the homebodies something to drool over amid the drudgery of performing their day-to-day routines: laundry, dishes, ironing, cleaning and cooking often without any modern time-saving conveniences. Mason fleetingly transported them to far-off enchantment. Vendig's carefully crafted plots temporarily ferried them away every single day.

The second good fortune that occurred to *Perry Mason* during its radio adaptation was the arrival of actor John Larkin to play the namesake character. Perhaps no one could have brought the part to life better than he. He won it in the spring of 1947, debuting March 31 that year, and kept it until the series left the air nearly nine years hence at the end of 1955. Larkin imbued the part with inflections earned from a myriad of radio serials in which he earned his living. Over that period with Vendig providing matchless scripts and Larkin's quick-tempered, no-nonsense, authoritative reflections, *Perry Mason* reached the zenith of striking radio dramatization.

Procter & Gamble was obviously satisfied with the collective effort, too. Upon introducing its “new washday miracle,” Tide detergent, in 1946, the firm appropriated that commodity to *Perry Mason*, reassigning Camay elsewhere on its many shows. Tide became the most popular brand-name laundry product in history. By 1949 it was the best selling washday cleaning agent in the United States. While all of the credit for Tide’s early success can’t be measured by a single soap opera, the drama featuring it in all of its commercials contributed heavily to the product’s launch.

P&G was so pleased with the results of its crime drama in the afternoons that—in the early 1950s—it began to look for a method of transforming that serial into a daytime television property. Negotiations were conducted with Erle Stanley Gardner who adamantly refused. Possibly because of the failures in film in the 1930s over which he had no control, he was unwilling to allow the highly successful *Mason* to go to video, fearing he would have little authority. P&G wasn’t about to relinquish what it believed would be a strong show, however. When Gardner nixed it, the soapmaker turned to Irving Vendig and asked him to create a *Mason*-like protagonist for a serial with dark undertones for afternoon viewing. The result was *The Edge of Night*, a half-hour soap opera that debuted on April 2, 1956 just three months after *Perry Mason* left the aural ether. And who was hired to play Mike Karr, the crusading assistant district attorney there? None other than John Larkin, of course! With such a winning combination—sponsor-network-author-actor—it could hardly have improved the concept. While Larkin and Vendig eventually departed from the fold, the serial remained a hit for years, not leaving the airwaves until December 28, 1984, nearly 29 years after it premiered.

*Perry Mason* on radio never wavered in its ability to keep the listeners returning for more. Its 3,221 installments rivaled and often surpassed the dramatic series airing in

radio's primetime hours. While the famous counselor's crime and mystery fare could be branded as chilling, Mason's audience perpetually provided a warm reception for those daily exhibitions.

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