

SPERDVAC SPOTLIGHT ON SAMMY JONES • RESOLVING A CASE OF MISATTRIBUTION • EVA LE GAILLIENNE



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SPERDVAC



THE EDITOR HAS HIS SAY

SPERDVAC has a new board of directors. Well, to be precise, it's a newly impaneled board for the 2025–2026 corporate year, with many familiar names returning to serve. Two returning board members are stepping into new roles: Corey Harker assumes the top spot as SPERDVAC's president, and Zach Eastman takes on the vice-presidency. Sean Dougherty continues in his role as membership chair, while Walden Hughes remains in his role as activities chair. Also making a comeback is James Scully, who last served in 2021, along with longtime SPERDVAC stalwart Larry Gassman—former president many times over—returning after a few years away from the management side of things. The sole new face on the board is Constance Campanella, a valuable addition to the board since she specializes in non-profit organizations.

We extend a resounding round of applause and heartfelt gratitude to our outgoing board members. Their dedication to preserving and encouraging radio drama, variety, and comedy has been nothing short of extraordinary.

A special standing ovation goes to Tim Knopfler and Bob Tevis, who have led SPERDVAC with unwavering commitment over the past five years. Through both triumphs and challenges, they have guided the organization into the 21st century, ensuring that our love for classic radio remains accessible to all. One of their most notable achievements was laying the groundwork for our online presence. Our website—while not perfect—was a crucial first step, a seed planted for the future. And now, with a new board at the helm, we look forward to building on that foundation, enhancing and expanding our digital reach. So, to Tim, Bob, and departing board member Phil Oldham—thank you for your passion, your perseverance, and your vision. The work you've done continues to inspire, and we are excited for what's to come.

In the next issue, this long-winded missive will be replaced by the succinct and dependable president's message.

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SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT. If

a
new board

Setting
the Record
Straight

25 + 1
Who's
Counting?

there's one thing we can count on at *Radiogram*, it's our sharp-eyed readers keeping us honest. Every issue, our pages are pored over with the scrutiny of a detective examining a crime scene. And when an error is

found—or errors!—believe me, Ed—he hears about it.

Now, most of the time, the blame falls squarely on the editor. This operation is a one-man show, and everything that reaches our readers passes through his crossed eyes and addled brain. But even with glasses, things slip past.

Factual errors, however, are another matter entirely. Recently, a few dedicated radio historians pointed out some inaccuracies in past articles—not with malice, mind you, but with the noble intention of setting the record straight. While they praised the articles highly, they couldn't let certain slip-ups go

unchecked.

In "Growing Up Listening to Jack Benny" from our January/February issue, a few of our dedicated Jack Benny enthusiasts noticed some factual discrepancies. For instance, *The Phil Harris-Alice Faye Show* was mentioned as radio's first spinoff, but *The Great Gildersleeve* had actually spun off from *Fibber McGee & Molly* eight years earlier. Additionally, during the war years, it was Larry Stevens—not Kenny Baker—who filled in for Dennis Day.

A few other details also caught the attention of our fact-checkers: Jack's writing team consisted of 12 members; Phil Harris received his own show in 1946 but remained with Benny until 1952; by that year, Phil's show aired on NBC while Benny had moved to CBS. And while Ricky and David Nelson did eventually play themselves on *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, this didn't happen until the 1949–1950 season, about halfway through the series' run. Lastly, Don Wilson, Dennis Day, and Eddie Anderson were all regular cast members of Jack's television series.

Bob Mills' stimulating reminiscence of growing up with Jack Benny is further enriched by these adjustments. His deep appreciation and love for the subject—one that profoundly shaped not only his livelihood

Continued Page 15



Sammy Jones

by Sean Dougherty

SPERDVAC MEMBERSHIP CHAIR

THAT “P” IN SPERDVAC stands for preserving our classic radio history and there is no one out there doing more on that front than our SPERDVAC SPOTLIGHT member this month, Sammy Jones. Sammy’s background as a younger member who discovered classic radio on his own in the 1990s shows that it’s not necessary to have lived through

the classic radio era to become an important contributor to the hobby. As one of the experts on transferring and cleaning archival recordings to more easily preserved and shared digital format, Sammy contributes to the future of the hobby and we’re very excited to have his time for this issue’s column.

Q. How did you get involved with the hobby? And how did that lead to you being a leader in classic radio preservation?

I got involved when I was in the fifth grade, about 1993, because I had an interest in Sherlock Holmes stories and I was reading books at my local public library, which had cassettes of the Basil Rathbone and Nigel Bruce 1940s radio show in the library’s audio book section. I didn’t really know what a radio show was. I popped the tape in and right off the bat “Petri wine brings you Basil Rathbone and Nigel Bruce in the New Adventures of Sherlock Holmes,” and I was hooked. Just like by magic, I started finding other things. My public library had a few books, including a history of old time radio called “Sounds in the Air: The Golden Age of Radio” by Norman H. Finkelstein. It covered Jack Benny and the serials, a chapter on “Goodnight Gracie” and so on. That introduced me to some of the names and back then you could find cassette tapes in places like Walmart. There was a Jack Benny and Fibber McGee and Molly, an Amos ‘N Andy and a Shadow. Meanwhile, my public library got more and more.

Q. Where did you get these skills to be able to work with digital media and older media? How did you get involved in preservation after just being a fan?

That came out of my record collecting hobby, which is parallel to classic radio but sometimes intersects with it. Just as I was collecting 78 rpm records, I started to collect transcription discs because it was the next logical thing to collect. Once I realized that these are the master materials that make our hobby possible, I got really interested. Around 2008, I started collecting transcriptions in earnest and participating in auctions. That’s when I got my first Jack Benny master transcription disc (from 1948) and it was like holding the Holy Grail. I had a 16-inch-capable turntable and putting that disc on and listening to it, I was blown away. The sound was like standing on the other side of the glass in the control room. That experience is like a drug—you get a high from it and you don’t want it to go away. I just had to collect more and started preserving them the best I could. My equipment and technique have changed and improved over those 16-17 years since I started.

Q. So you were largely self-taught then?

To some degree, because I had to learn how to do all this with my 78 rpm hobby. I taught myself how to use turntables and preamps and what stylus was appropriate and how to change them without breaking them. In college, I had a mentor in recording work who was in his 70s

and he remembered the classic radio era so we bonded over that. The Harman Kardon Citation 1 preamp that is the heart of my little restoration studio is a gift from him. It’s a preamp that he built from a kit in the 1950s. It has the turnover and roll-offs for any 78 or transcription you could want because in the 1950s people still needed that and you might very well have some transcriptions and 78s from different eras that you would need to dial in the different turnovers and roll-offs.

Q. That’s specialized equipment—what does it cost to be able to do the preservation work you do?

It’s not cheap but it can be done without breaking the bank. You will spend several thousand dollars to get started. That’s a hurdle to a lot of people who just aren’t that interested in doing the preservation work. I understand, they’re fans. They want to hear the shows and collecting and cleaning the discs and selecting the stylus as well as the turnover and roll-off for the disc may not be very interesting to them. I love listening to shows but to be able to hold a disc in my hands that nobody has touched in 60, or 70 or 80 years, and know how it can be preserved, it’s a pleasure and an honor to have the skills to do that.

Q. What are some of the best “finds” that you have preserved?

I’ve been able to source and bring to the hobby several of the earliest episodes of Amos ‘n’ Andy, from 1928 and 1929—they created the syndication industry. Those are the first transcription discs. There are more of those coming, probably by the time this article publishes. Seth Winter, an audio engineer, friend and mentor of mine, put a lot of work into making them sound as good as we could without stripping all the sound quality out of them.

We also just found two Lone Ranger recordings from 1937. Everyone always believed the shows weren’t recorded before 1938 but that is not 100% true. There were recordings made regularly in 1937 for WOR radio, probably because they wanted to time shift the program but we don’t really know why. These transcriptions are the WXYZ production recorded on transcriptions that have WOR labels. It’s the same Ranger you know except you’re hearing the network version with commercials over that long William Tell overture piece at the beginning. That’s really exciting to me and people are going to find that interesting when they can finally hear it.

Q. Where else have you found rare discs?

I tend to get rare discs through auctions but sometimes there are

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just other disc dealers who got them from estate sales. Sometimes the trail is four-five owners deep and you don't really know where the discs have been all these years. There's another series that I'm really proud to have. It's called *Light and Mellow*, a musical show from the late 1940s produced at NBC San Francisco—only heard on the West Coast. Armand Girard is the singing star. He died very young in the 1950s. He had been singing on radio from at least the 1930s. I found hits from the *New York Times* of 1930s broadcasts in New York. He moved to San Francisco and his show was a big deal there. I got those discs from a collector who wasn't particularly interested in them and paid about \$500 for 500 discs—every show is two discs. The fidelity is so clear and the surface noise is so low. The high frequencies are so high that you might as well be standing in the booth.

Q. It sounds like a lot of these discs were saved by people who weren't interested in classic radio.

Most classic radio collectors are not really interested in collecting transcriptions because you can't play them. The transcriptions are traded and sold and handled by disc dealers—that's where you have to look for them.

Q. You go to many of the in-person conventions for radio fans like SPERDVAC and The Mid Atlantic Nostalgia Convention that many of the younger fans in the hobby don't do—what value do you find there?

People of my generation and younger aren't joiners like the previous generations were. I've found it really valuable because I grew up in a rural area where there was very little access to hobbies. I stumbled upon classic radio in the library. Even after the Internet exposed me to the hobby, it's still very isolated because you're just on the other side of a computer. The friendships and trading relationships you make in person are invaluable. Once I was able to travel and go to conventions, I met legends like Terry Salmonson and Ted Davenport, who have become really good friends. It's a great part of the hobby. I wish more collectors would get out and go to conventions.

Q. What value have you gained from being part of groups like SPERDVAC?

The best part is networking—meeting so many people in the hobby with so much knowledge and access to material that is ready for preservation. I've been connected with the National Lum 'n' Abner society and have gotten access to their disc and tape archive. I'm preserving more of the Lum 'n' Abner Horlick's and Postum Shows from the original lacquer transcriptions, and that will be the best sound (though this is solely for preservation work, and they aren't selling copies at this time). It's a beneficial connection that I've made through belonging to these groups. 🎧





Button up!

Resolving a persistent case of misattribution

by John Slavney

ON JANUARY 20, 1974, *CBS Radio Mystery Theater* aired one of its best episodes, the remarkable thriller “The Chinaman Button,” starring Paul Hecht, Mason Adams and Ralph Bell. I remember listening to the episode when it first aired, thrilled by the grown-up content, astounded by the jolting immorality of the Phil Thurston character (played with convincing authenticity by Paul Hecht), and floored by the capping plot twist, which is as brutal as a sharp blow from a fireplace poker. This was the episode that hooked me on *Radio Mystery Theater*.

The story, along with the decidedly tone-deaf title, comes right out of *Mad Men* not surprising given that the author, Henry Slesar, was one the original ad men glorified in that recent TV series. Slesar had a career in advertising that stretched back to the 1950s, beginning as a copywriter at the age of 17, and quickly moving up to creative director, partner, and founder of his own firm all the while writing for pulps, TV and movies. In a 1964 newspaper article, Slesar said, “I keep my advertising job because there’s no security in writing.”

The origins of this episode are often misstated with many claiming that Slesar’s radio play is based on or adapted from Richard Matheson’s “Button, Button,” a short story that was first published in the June 1970 edition of *Playboy* magazine. But the real origins are far more interesting.

Both Slesar’s and Matheson’s stories draw from a thought experiment called the *Mandarin Paradox*, an idea famously articulated in François-René de Chateaubriand’s *The Genius of Christianity* in 1802, in which he posed the question: “If thou couldst by a mere wish kill a fellow-creature in China, and inherit his fortune in Europe, with the

supernatural conviction that the fact would never be known, wouldst thou consent to form such a wish?” Scholar Carlo Ginzburg notes that here Chateaubriand was responding to French philosopher Denis Diderot’s earlier suggestion that when there is no fear of punishment, “distance in space or time weakened all feelings and all sorts of guilty conscience, even of crime.”

It’s true that Matheson’s story led to several adaptations, including a 1986 episode of *The Twilight Zone* revival and the 2009 film *The Box*. In an interview accompanying the 2009 Blue-Ray release of that film, Matheson credited his wife, Ruth Ann, who heard about the Mandarin Paradox in a psychology class. Students were asked whether they would accept \$50,000 in exchange for causing the death of someone they didn’t know. Matheson said that he “was amazed that no one had ever taken that idea before.”

But a number of writers had taken that idea before, including *CBS Radio Mystery Theater* scriptwriter Henry Slesar.

Slesar’s *Radio Mystery Theater* script is based on his own short story of the same name, published in the September 1964 issue of *Ace Magazine* six years before Matheson’s story appeared in *Playboy*. But beyond their common source in the Mandarin Paradox, the two stories share few similarities.

Matheson’s piece takes place in a run-down New York City apartment where a weary housewife, Norma, receives a package containing a box with a push-button mounted on it, along a note explaining that a Mr. Steward will call on her at eight p.m. Upon arriving, Steward explains to Norma and her husband, Arthur, that the button is connected to a bell in his firm’s office: “If you push the button, somewhere in the world, someone you don’t know will die. In return

John Slavney lives in Madison, Wisconsin, and hosts a Facebook group dedicated to the CBS Radio Mystery Theater at <https://www.facebook.com/groups/cbsrmt/>. Works cited: “Killing a Chinese Mandarin: The Moral Implications of Distance” by Carlo Ginzburg. Excerpted from Hufton, Olwen H., ed. 1995. *Historical Change and Human Rights: The Oxford Amnesty Lectures* 1994. New York, NY: BasicBooks. [mhttps://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mandarin_paradox](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mandarin_paradox), citing Ginzburg and Hanotte-Zawislak, Anna (2019-06-28). “Le retour du “paradoxe du mandarin” dans la construction de l’arriviste littéraire au XIXe siècle”. *Cahiers ERTA* (18). Uniwersytet Gdański: 9–23. doi:10.4467/23538953CE.19.010.10695. Retrieved 2020-01-23. *The Republic*, Book 2, 2:359a–2:360d). [https://dbpedia.org/page/Ring_of_Gyges]. Copyright © 2025 John Slavney

for which you receive a payment of \$50,000.” Norma and Arthur are first horrified, then doubt the validity of the offer and wonder whether it’s a practical joke or even some kind of psychological research. But Norma begins to get curious and the next day, she pushes the button. It doesn’t turn out well for her or for Arthur.

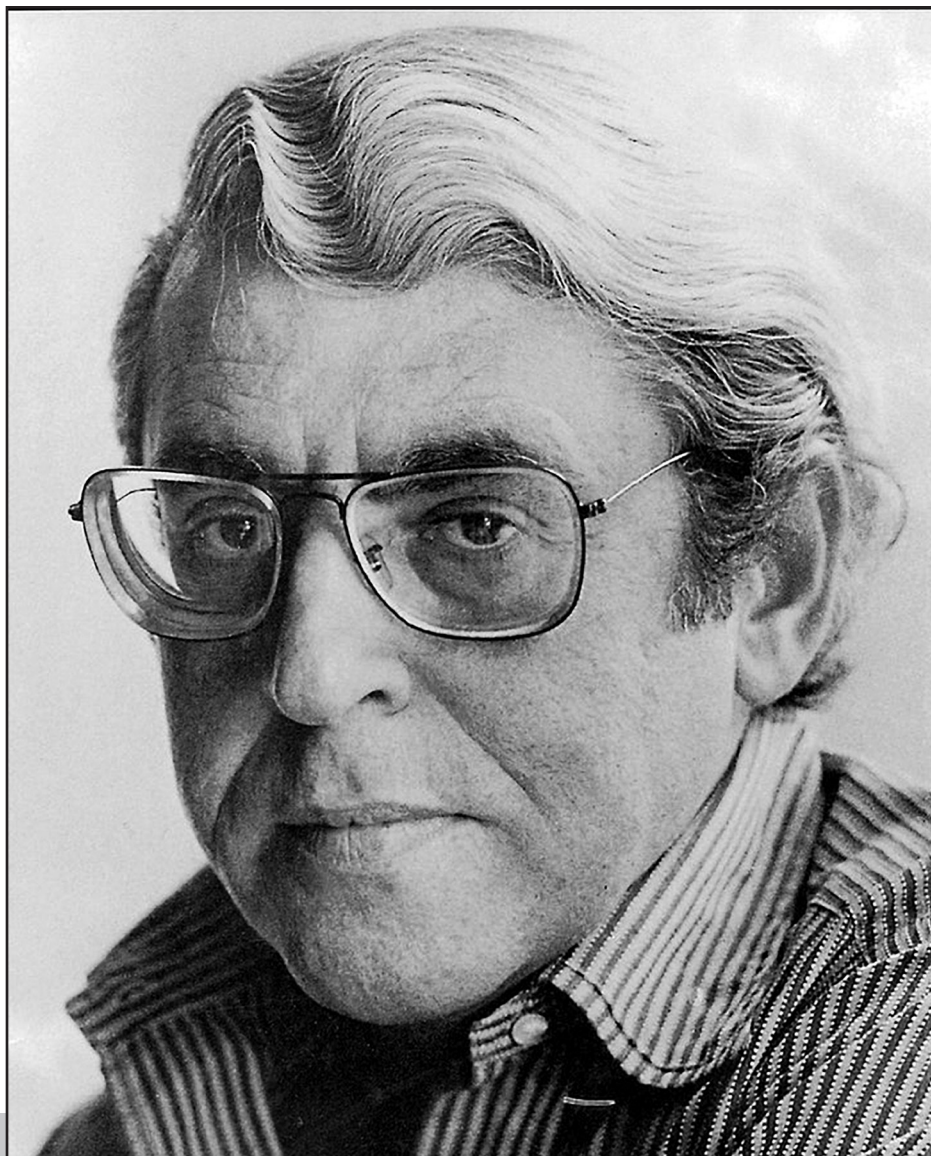
Slesar’s story, by contrast, is set in the hurly-burly world of mid-century advertising, and, indeed, one of the pleasures of the episode lies in Slesar’s evocation of the details of the workings of a big New York City advertising agency. Paul Hecht’s Phil, for instance, recounts that a fellow in the art department helped him create the fake letterhead that is central to his scheme using Letraset-style rub-on type: “Can’t tell it from the real thing,” he assures his slightly more principled co-worker, Lou, who’s played by a note-perfect Ralph Bell.

Slesar’s story begins as Phil returns from a vacation in Hawaii to find that the agency has lost the Brewster account—one of their largest—thanks to the interference of Walter Van Haas, a newly-promoted do-gooder at Brewster. Van Haas refuses to play along with the agency’s practices, uncovering overcharges and rejecting kickbacks despite the personal benefits they could bring him. Phil, infuriated, refuses to believe Van Haas is any more incorruptible than anyone else—least of all himself and devises a plan he’s sure will expose Van Haas’s hypocrisy.

Posing as Mr. Thompson, a man with vague ties to a Johannesburg law firm, Phil tells Van Haas about a wealthy cousin in the South African diamond trade, a distant relative with no traceable heirs except Van Haas himself. If the cousin dies, Van Haas stands to inherit millions, but there’s a catch: the cousin isn’t likely to die any time soon. Phil offers Van Haas a solution: for half the inheritance, he’ll arrange to have the cousin eliminated. Like Norma and Arthur, Van Haas is horrified, saying, “I’ve never heard such a filthy proposition in my entire life.” But he also gets curious.

In fiction, the “killing at a distance” moral dilemma predates Slesar and Matheson both, appearing in Balzac’s 1835 novel *Père Goriot*. There, the main character, Rastignac, asks his friend Bianchon if he would push a button that would result in the death of a man in faraway China—a man he’s never seen and doesn’t know—if doing so would make Bianchon wealthy. “Who among us would not push that button and kill the Mandarin?” Rastignac asks, while considering a similar dilemma in his own life.

The theme also plays a part in José Maria de Eça de Queirós’s 1880 novel *The Manda-*



The prolific Henry Slesar, author of several scripts, including “The Chinaman Button,” for the *CBS Radio Mystery Theater*, a revival of audio drama produced in the 1970s by Himan Brown.

rin, in which a poor Portuguese civil servant encounters the Devil, disguised as a man. The Devil tempts him with unlimited wealth, but only if he rings a bell that will kill a wealthy Chinese Mandarin.

Alexandre Dumas incorporated the thought experiment in his 1844-46 novel, *The Count of Monte Cristo*, in which the Count calls it forth to examine Madame de Villefort’s character: “The bad side of human thought will always be defined by the paradox of Jean Jacques Rousseau, you know, the mandarin who is killed at five hundred leagues distance by raising the tip of the finger . . . You will find very few persons who will go and brutally thrust a knife in the heart of a fellow-creature... [but] if there be no blood, no groans, no convulsions, and, above all, that horrid and compromising

moment of accomplishing the act, then one escapes the clutch of the human law, which says to you, ‘Do not disturb society!’”

Going back further, the idea pops-up in Plato’s *Republic* in a passage discussing the Ring of Gyges, a hypothetical ring that grants invisibility, allowing Plato to explore whether a rational person would act justly even without the fear of consequences.

Notably, Slesar also later adapted his short story for German television in the series *Die Krimistunde – Geschichten für Kenner* (*The Crime Lesson – Stories for Connoisseurs*) as “Knopfdruck für einen Chinesen,” airing June 9, 1983. The series, which ran for 105 episodes, frequently adapted Slesar’s stories, some of which were previously adapted for Alfred Hitchcock’s television presentations. ♣

He Oversaw Radi

by Jim Cox

HE WAS THE LAST OF A BREED of producers and directors in radio's golden age. Bruno Zirato, Jr., not an instantly recognized moniker among prominent ethereal personalities, occupied a coveted spot in network radio's fading epoch. As boss of the medium's final double dramatic series, Zirato deeply influenced the delayed demise of the aural narrative.

A **S A PROFICIENT ADMINISTRATOR** working behind the scenes during the golden age of audio air Zirato was part of the CBS veneer nearly two decades before securing his final plum assignment in radio. He produced and directed the medium's concluding dramatic series as coast-to-coast programming gasped its last breath. The impact of the ultimate years of the durable dramas *Suspense* and *Yours Truly, Johnny Dollar* is recalled by millions of fans as those iconic broadcasts lived on borrowed time.

The significance of both dramas cannot be understated. Each encompassed an enduring legacy.

Suspense, the older of the two, debuted on a variety series under the appellation *Forecast* July 22, 1940, as a single fabrication. *Forecast* aired summer tryouts for potential ethereal series. The audition play kicking off years of what would become *Suspense* was titled "The Lodger." Its story was a vocal adaptation of a 1926 Alfred Hitchcock film, *The Lodger: A Story of the London Fog*, and based on the classic novel by Marie Belloc Lowndes titled *The Lodger*. On the air Hitchcock directed, his initial foray into American radio production.

The preliminary morphed into what would eventually be celebrated as "radio's outstanding theatre of thrills" in a double decade run. *Suspense* premiered its series of mostly thriller-type horror plots over CBS on June 17, 1942. Each week fans were reminded they were hearing "a tale well calculated to keep you in ... suspense."

The narratives featured well-known names from contrary spheres of entertainment—stage, screen, radio, television. Among them were Agnes Moorehead, Orson Welles, Henry

Fonda, Joseph Cotton, Humphrey Bogart, Judy Garland, Lena Horne, Cary Grant, Marlene Dietrich, Eve McVeagh, Peter Lorre, Dinah Shore, Frederic March and Ronald Colman.

The stories usually offered enough tingling excitement to send cold chills up and down listeners' spines. Memorable plays included Lucille Fletcher's "Sorry, Wrong Number" and "The Hitchhiker." Jack Benny, Lucille Ball, Fibber McGee & Molly, Phil Harris & Alice Faye, Ozzie & Harriet Nelson and more comedians appeared against type.

Bruno Zirato Jr. was the last to produce and direct the long-running *Suspense*. A few eminent predecessors were Norman Macdonnell, Elliott Lewis, William Spier and William N. Robson.


While *Suspense* featured a different luminary every week, *Yours Truly, Johnny Dollar* boasted a single figure as "the man with the action-packed expense account—America's fabulous freelance insurance investigator." Thespians tapped to play the namesake character included Charles Russell, Edmond O'Brien, John Lund, Bob Bailey, Bob Readick and Mandel Kramer. Bailey's portrayal from 1955

to 1960 is commonly considered the best acting. Bailey might have persisted to the end of the run had the show not shifted its origination. More about that in a moment.

A radio historian's assessment of the protagonist Dollar reads: "As a mythical figure in radio mystery, the thinly veiled playboy was authoritative, dynamic and charming; in the decades since, he has become an icon of the hero-worshippers among vintage radio enthusiasts."

In the storylines Dollar pursued commodities and villains with a vengeance. Another observer maintained that he possessed "an analytical mind, a nose for trouble, and the brawn to take

Radio's Last Hurrah



BRUNO ZIRATO, JR., was a key figure in the Golden Age of Radio, known for his work as a producer and director. He played a significant role in shaping some of the most popular and enduring programs of the era, particularly *Suspense* and *Yours Truly, Johnny Dollar*. His efforts helped define the dramatic and narrative structures of radio storytelling, preserving the art of audio drama even as television emerged as the dominant medium.



The best shot of the camera-shy Mr. Zirato, at far right, here with members of the cast of his 1956 series *The Woolworth Hour* with host Donald Woods, guest Nancy Walker, and maestro Percy Faith, noted for setting the mood for both performer and audience during the CBS Sunday afternoon series. From the May 1956 edition of *TV-Radio Mirror*.

care of himself when the going got dirty.” Dollar was often impatient and adept at blatantly padding his expense account

before totaling it up for an insurance client hiring him.

Bruno Zirato, Jr., was the last of a wave of producers, beginning with Gordon P. Hughes at the show’s premier February 11, 1949. Hughes was followed by better remembered Jack Johnstone, Jaime del Valle and Zirato.

These two dramatic features’ extensions after others had been cancelled prolonged hope that radio drama might never die. It did, of course, and after departing on Sunday, September 30, 1962, a hush fell over America’s

coast-to-coast auditory theatre. The Golden Age of Radio begun in the 1930s was over.

Without connections to a few dramas that surfaced in succeeding decades the passing of *Suspense* and *Dollar* unmistakably marked the end of an era.

Zirato’s good fortune arrived when, late in the 1950s, CBS decided to alter the venue of its remaining quartet of evening narratives. At the time the four—some emanated from Hollywood every week. At that juncture CBS was the only network still airing any dramatic plays. The chain’s executives believed that shifting their origination to New York would reduce expenses substantially. This took a while to implement, and it finally transpired partially in November 1960.

In the interim CBS tweaked its original concept. One of those dramas, *Have Gun,*



Veteran radio performer Santos Ortega made several appearances in various roles in *Suspense* during Zirato’s tenure as producer-director.

In the prevailing model *Gunsmoke* persisted from Hollywood while *Dollar* and *Suspense* were transplanted to New York. Bruno Zirato, Jr., was chosen to produce and direct the Big Apple tales.

Will Travel, was withdrawn. Its run ended November 27, 1960, two days after the web banished the *Amos 'n' Andy Music Hall* and a handful of daytime serials. The chain's aural inventory was reduced to shows headlined by Arthur Godfrey, Art Linkletter, Bing Crosby and Rosemary Clooney, Lowell Thomas's newscast, and a trio of evening dramas: *Gunsmoke*, *Dollar* and *Suspense*.

In the prevailing model *Gunsmoke* persisted from Hollywood while *Dollar* and *Suspense* were transplanted to New York. Bruno Zirato, Jr., was chosen to produce and direct the Big Apple tales.

While the name Zirato wasn't a well-recognized sobriquet, he'd been managing lesser-known series at CBS for years. Being out of the public eye he labored incognito for myriad shows. The network may have saved the best for last in Zirato's tenancy.

Zirato hailed from a family that made a name for itself long before he rose to prominence as a radio producer and director. His daddy, Bruno Zirato, Sr., (right) is a fascinating probe gaining noteworthy fame in other staging orbits. In fact, the father is better known than the offspring, reaffirming the notion that Junior served with little public scrutiny. A brief family history provides a setting for the offspring's successes.

Bruno Zirato, Sr., born in 1884, was an Italian immigrant to the U.S. A journalist by trade, he worked for a Roman newspaper in 1912 when he boarded a steamer for America. His early years in New York saw the enterprising entrepreneur reporting for an Italian-language newspaper, teaching Italian at New York University's summer school, lecturing on Italian literature, and coaching singers in pronunciation.

In 1915, he met famed operatic tenor Enrico Caruso. The pair hit it off instantly. Caruso hired Zirato as his personal secretary. Increasing responsibilities in the professional musical world came next

with ties to the New York Philharmonic from 1927 until his death 45 years later. There were stints in which Zirato Sr. was the orchestra's spokesman, personal assistant to the director, associate manager, co-manager, manager, and consultant to its board.

Junior's mama was no talent slouch either. In 1921, Zirato Sr. wed soprano Nina Morgana. Junior was born within a year. The boy saw an incredible number of "greats of classical music" in his home as he grew. After graduating from the Collegiate School for Boys in New York and Duke University at Durham, N.C., he earned a Master of Arts from New York's Columbia University.



Zirato Jr. knew his father's professional occupation wasn't his.

"I adored him," the younger Zirato confirmed. He co-wrote a biography about his famous father. "But I couldn't do what he did," he allowed. I asked him if he knew anyone in broadcast-

ing." His papa mentioned CBS owner-executive William S. Paley. Young Zirato replied, "That'll do."

As it turned out CBS hired him in 1943 as an apprentice script writer. After a while his career advanced. Zirato Jr. produced, directed, or combined both tasks for nearly a dozen shows preceding his engagement with *Dollar* and *Suspense*.

His portfolio included *Stage Struck*, *The Robert Q. Lewis Show*, *The Mindy Carson Show*, *Stepping Out*, *Sing It Again*, *The Teddy Wilson Show*, *The Woolworth Hour*, *Stage Struck* (again), and *The Rayburn and Finch Show*. In addition, he supervised

radio simulcasts of the TV programs *Songs for Sale* and *The Show Goes On* which gave him exposure to a newer medium.

As the golden age of radio ebbed, Zirato, then in the prime of life at 40, wasn't ready to hang it up.

Once again, luckily, he was in the right place at the right time. CBS needed help in managing its TV game show *To Tell the Truth* which had been airing since 1956. Zirato's extensive background and availability coalesced to add him to the show's crew, initially as associate producer in 1962—the year *Dollar* and *Suspense* left radio—and then as producer, a role he filled until he departed CBS in 1967.

In 1949, he married Barbara Keefe. They had two children, Jeb Zirato and Nina Goebert. In 1979, unable to afford his New York apartment any longer and with a mid-1960s diagnosis of multiple sclerosis, Zirato resettled in Arizona.

His diminished health limited his opportunities for employment. He expressed, "People don't give you a job



Mandel Kramer as the final "yours truly, Johnny Dollar," during Zirato's last season of CBS's legendary detective series.



Again, camera-shy Mr. Zirato, producer-director of *The Robert Q. Lewis Show*, joins announcer Lee Vines, Robert Q. Lewis, singer Richard Hayes, musical director Ray Bloch, and singer Judy Johnson for a press conference at which Lewis entreated audiences to return, as he had done, to radio. From *TV-Radio Mirror* May 1957. Of Zirato's debut as producer-director of the program in November 1952, *Variety* stated that: "Robert Q. Lewis's amiable fooling is back on CBS for a new sponsor, with satisfying results for comic, bankroller and audience alike. Lewis's easy, relaxing style and fresh, slightly offbeat material make for an amusing quarter hour to give a lift to a Saturday morning. Comic doesn't take himself or his work seriously, and the light vein pays off in laughs. Saturdays opener had Lewis rolling off a few funny gags; singing a song, "Walking My Baby Back Home," with quippy interpolations; joshing with the Chordettes, and joining with them for a final song number. He also got in some references to the election, and to mud-slinging, which led into another couple of good gags, and finally into a commercial. Lewis does his own commercials, and delivers them in the same light vein as his other material, but getting the message over. Bruno Zirato, Jr., direction kept program moving smoothly and deftly."

when you have a cane."

Until retirement, Zirato was hired by a few Phoenix marketing firms for various jobs.

Bruno Zirato, Jr., died in Arizona at 86 in 2008.

There are a few quips from the acclaimed radio and television producer-director worth noting.

While producing CBS's *Woolworth Hour* as Percy Faith rehearsed the

orchestra once, Zirato's attention was drawn to solo clarinetist Jimmy Abato. He inquired of Faith who the artist was. "Abato used to be with the Philharmonic," Faith explained.

Zirato responded rapidly, interrupting the rehearsal, shouting over the instrumentalists: "What's the matter, Abato? My father's band ain't good enough for ya?"

Interviewed by *The New York Times* in

1966, the multimedia producer-director claimed he possessed "an epidermal knowledge of everything."

Zirato confessed, "I'm always reading. Even in the bathroom. Dictionaries, encyclopedias, *The Times*, *The Trib*."

In a 1995 *Arizona Republic* feature, the younger Zirato looked back on his career in dual broadcasting media.

"Radio was great fun," he confirmed. "Television was great work." 📺

Cliff Soubier

THE NICEST GUY TO EVER TERRIFY A RADIO AUDIENCE

■ Cliff Soubier, a beloved radio actor, terrified audiences as a villain while charming them as a gentle storyteller, embodying radio's ultimate paradox of menace and warmth.

by Alan Irving

BY DAY, he was mild-mannered Cliff Soubier—stocky, red-haired, and quick with a smile. But come showtime, his voice alone sent chills down your spine. If there was a villain to be played on the airwaves, odds were it was Cliff snarling, growling, and plotting some fiendish demise.

For radio fans in the golden age of drama, Soubier became the go-to tough guy, delivering cold-blooded threats and deadly schemes week after week on NBC's *The First Nighter*. Behind the microphone, he racked up more on-air murders than he could count—shootings, strangulations, poisonings, drownings, even a deadly spider or two. But the moment the “on-air” sign went dark, the menace melted away. In real life, Soubier was famously affable, the kind of guy who might have held the door open for you, then politely apologize for nearly bumping your elbow.

It's a long way from the Canadian medicine show where his career began. He was born in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada, of a theatrical family. While still a child, he donned the curls and white dress for the role of Little Eva in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and much to his boyish disgust, he had to go to heaven every night on a rope. He sang as a soprano soloist in a Boy's Cathedral choir and has been all over the country. At 16, Soubier was eking out \$5 a week walking a slack wire and doing grunt work for a traveling pitchman. One day, the troupe's perpetually drunk comedian finally got the boot. The “doctor” running the show turned to young Cliff and said, “You're on.”

And that was that. From there, Soubier hit the road, chasing roles wherever he could find them. In Ohio, he joined a scrappy stock company performing melodramas like *The*

Moonshiner's Daughter, perfecting the very brand of theatrical villainy that would later make him radio royalty.

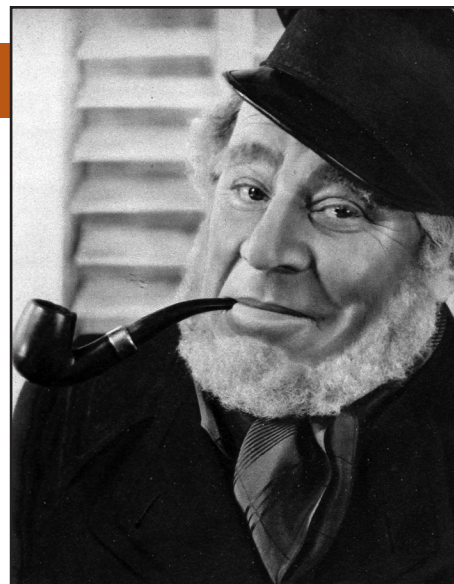
But like any good drama, there were twists. There was the time his musical comedy tour ended abruptly when the theatre burned down—taking his entire wardrobe with it. Flat broke, with only one increasingly threadbare suit to his name, Soubier nearly gave up on acting altogether. But fate had other plans. A role opened up in yet another melodrama, *Jerry, the Tramp*, and the one outfit he had left? Perfect for the part.

By 1929, Soubier had carved out a solid career in Chicago theatre. Even better, he met Maria Powers, a southern actress starring opposite him in a production of *Rain*. Sparks flew, and the pair were soon married, honeymooning in Alaska.

Returning home, however, Soubier's luck briefly ran out. His theatre gig was gone. Maria picked up some radio work, and one day while waiting for her at WLS in Chicago, Cliff overheard someone frantically searching for someone who could do a Scottish accent. “Hoot, mon!” he quipped. Minutes later, he was on the air.

The very next day? His first radio murder. And from that point forward, Cliff Soubier was officially radio's favorite bad guy.

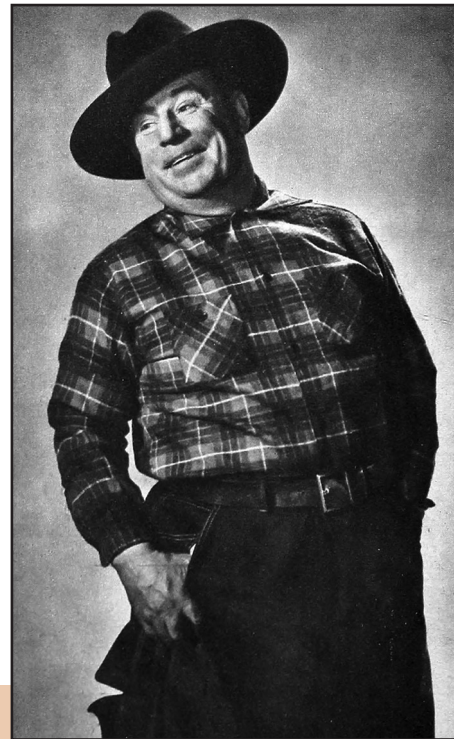
But here's the twist: Soubier wasn't just the voice of doom and danger. In fact, many WLS listeners of 1932 knew him just as well as “Old Pappy,” the gentle, whimsical storyteller who spun tales for children about animals, flowers, and the wonders of the natural world. His talent for storytelling and his appeal to children were utilized in later shows, including WBKB-TV Philadelphia's *Santa Claus North Pole Review* in 1953, and as Cliffie the Clown



on the early television series *Super Circus*.

So yes, the same man who's “killed” thousands of characters over the airwaves was also one of radio's most beloved, grandfatherly voices, a radio version of Boris Karloff, Frankenstein and Grinch.

Call it radio's greatest paradox. Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde? Maybe. But ask anyone who knew Cliff Soubier, and they'll tell you—whether he's playing a villain or a kindly old man, he was one of the nicest guys you'd ever want to meet.👊



Cliff Soubier as Henry Newman, bachelor sheep rancher, philosopher, good neighbor, and wise counsellor to all who come to him for advice in the soap opera *Lone Journey*, billed as “the distinguished American radio novel.”



Vive Le Gaillienne à la radio!

WHEN RADIO emerged in the 1920s, the actors' caste system placed Broadway's theatre elite at the top and radio actors at or near the bottom rung of the pecking order. The newness of radio and its distinctive demands were off-putting to many performers, but not to everyone. Among a small group of open-minded Broadway stars was the British-born actress Eva Le Gallienne. She made her radio debut in 1924 over New York's WOR. At the time, she was in her mid-twenties, basking in her stardom on the Broadway stage as Princess Alexandra in *The Swan*. During her first radio appearance, Eva delivered a short talk and read poetry written by her father, the noted English poet Richard Le Gallienne.

Like many celebrities summoned to the microphone, Eva found the experience bewildering. Radio presented challenges unlike anything she had previously encountered. An article in the October 1928 issue of *Radio Digest* by William Burke Miller described the widespread phenomenon of "mike fright." "In an endless procession, celebrities come and go before the microphone, but its apparent lack of response seems to rob them of the confidence and well-being with which they otherwise meet the public," Miller wrote. "A famous aviator, an explorer, a popular hero, a celebrated actress, a musician of world renown, a figure of international importance may appear before this instrument of chrome steel and duralumin, but to none does it offer encouragement or censure."

Miller listed numerous figures, including Eva Le Gallienne. "It is," he concluded, "the ever-present consciousness of critical listening strangers off there in the darkness, with no visible evidence of their attitude toward the speaker, that seems to terrify." Eva, however, was determined not to allow herself to be cowed by the microphone. She would claim she never suffered from mike fright, but she did admit that she had been a bit nervous during her early encounters with the microphone. Performing for an invisible audience was a new and unsettling experience, but radio intrigued her. The reason, she said, was because both honest emotions and insincerity were laid bare in the voice at the microphone. Therein was the challenge for the dramatic artist.

Though the theatrical stage remained Eva's professional focus throughout her lengthy career, she made a good faith effort to embrace radio. In 1926, her passion for theatre and growing interest in radio

converged when she founded New York's non-profit Civic Repertory Theatre. Using young, upcoming actors and charging modest ticket prices, she aimed to make quality plays accessible to people of limited means.

As the Civic Repertory gained public success, Eva prepared to introduce it to radio audiences. She had observed that the cheapest theatre seats were often the first to sell out, leading her to conclude that people of modest means had a deep love for theatre. She saw radio as a way to provide free "seats" to the masses, reaching audiences who couldn't afford to travel to New York for a Broadway play or who were homebound due to illness or other circumstances.

On September 26, 1929, the Civic Repertory Theatre launched a weekly radio series on the Columbia Broadcasting System titled *Civic Repertory Plays*. Each Thursday evening from 6:30 pm to 7:00 pm, Eva and her company re-created scenes from their current productions. The series ran as a sustainer for a few months before fading from the schedule. The Civic Repertory Theatre itself folded in 1933 due to financial difficulties caused by the Depression.

Despite the closure, Eva Le Gallienne's interest in radio persisted. She continued to grace the airwaves with her talent, appearing in a variety of programs over the following decades. Her radio roles were eclectic: on Rudy Vallee's

Fleischmann's Yeast Hour, she performed a scene from *Camille*; on *Shell Chateau*, hosted by Al Jolson, she was squeezed between a Dizzy Dean interview and a professional impersonator. She delivered a scene from *The Swan*. "It was great fun," she remarked, "and an interesting as well as illuminating test for me."

Her many other appearances included *The Magic Key*, *Suspense*, *Great Plays*, *The World's Great Novels*, *Arthur Hopkins Presents*, and *The Ford Theatre*. In the summer of 1951, she served as commentator for *The New Theater*, NBC's short-lived attempt to revive *University Theater*.

By February 1, 1965, radio as Eva and the public once knew it had largely faded from prominence. On that day, however, she sat down with Studs Terkel for a radio interview at WFMT in Chicago. They discussed theatre—particularly repertory theatre—her career, and the "forgotten audience." Implicit in her remarks was the legacy of radio and its invisible audience of home listeners. 🎧



THE EDITOR HAS HIS SAY continued

but his life—shine through in his reflections. While facts can sometimes complicate storytelling, it is important to integrate them to provide a complete perspective.

As always, we tip our hats to our diligent readers for keeping us on our toes. Facts may have a pesky way of interfering with a good story, but in the end, the truth must win out.

Sometimes, historical details need a second look, and as dedicated guardians of radio history, we owe it to both history and those who lived it to ensure accuracy. One such case takes us back to our August 2020 issue, in which the story of *Quiz Kids* was articulated and the life of its producer, Louis Cowan. The late Jack French, a respected historian in his own right, made the claim that the tragic deaths of Cowan and his wife were due to “smoking in bed.”

However, multiple newspaper reports from the time tell a different story. The fire that claimed the Cowans’ lives began on the sixth floor of their two-story penthouse in a Manhattan hotel. Their bedroom was on the seventh floor—making it highly unlikely that “smoking in bed” was the cause. While fire department records are no longer available due to the passage of time, the Cowan family has been unwavering in their assertion, based on their own knowledge and conversations with our researcher, that the fire was electrical in origin.

Regrettably, we were unable to address this matter before Jack’s passing, but in the interest of historical accuracy, we want to set the record straight now. Every historian works with the best information available at the time, and we continue to honor Jack’s contributions to preserving radio history. But in this case, we feel it is important to acknowledge the Cowan family’s perspective and correct the record.

• • • • •

WHO’S COUNTING? This month marks a milestone—March officially rings in my 26th year as editor of *Radiogram*. For number crunchers, that means I’ve steered SPERDVAC’s flagship publication for half of the organization’s existence—plus one! That translates to 278 issues of a 16-page magazine, totaling an eyebrow-raising 4,448 pages.

Has it been a labor of love? Well, let’s just say there were moments when I considered fastening an anvil around my neck and jumping off the closest radio tower near the ocean. There were nights when inspiration was as elusive as a clear AM signal in a thunderstorm, and I had to resort to filling

pages with my own meandering musings (pen names are a wonderful thing).

I still remember the panic of my early days—staring at an empty layout, trying to fill 16 pages of a magazine with absolutely nothing to work with. Desperation led me to rummage through old radio magazines gathering dust in my cluttered office—an office that, I should note, bore an uncanny resemblance to a jail cell. I unearthed some intriguing historical tidbits, hastily rewrote them, and then, grasping at straws, filled a few pages with something I actually knew about: radio-themed movies.

The response from SPERDVAC brass was, shall we say, *unambiguous*—akin to a missile strike.

“This is a radio organization!” they belated. “Not movies, not television. *Radio*. *Radio, dummkopf!*” Message received, loud and clear.

Filling 16 pages—once 11 times a year, now a slightly more merciful six—has often felt like rowing solo across the Pacific in a leaky old row boat. But when the issue finally comes together, there’s a certain satisfaction. At least for me. The readers? Well, they’re never shy about sharing their opinions. Over the years, I’ve been called every variation of “idiot” imaginable—simpleton, ignoramus, and choice words unfit for print. The most recent insult? *Racist*—for daring to defend Kate Smith.

To borrow a phrase from the bard’s *Julius Caesar*, “Infamy, infamy, oh infamy... they all have it in for me!”

Wait. That’s not Shakespeare. No, that’s *Carry On*, as in *Carry On Cleo*, the raucous 1964 British comedy that has absolutely nothing to do with radio. There I go again.

But then, there are the kind souls who send notes of appreciation. One memorable letter read: “Thank you for your work; you do an outstanding job; I look forward to *Radiogram* every month. When are you quitting?” To this day, I’m unsure whether to be flattered or alarmed.

And so, after 26 years, the inevitable question looms: When am I finally packing it in? Truthfully, I probably should have quit 25 years ago. But for those eagerly awaiting my departure, don’t hold your breath just yet. I’ll be around for at least another four issues. Maybe six. Maybe more.

But as poet Andrew Marvell wisely warned, “. . . at my back I always hear / Time’s wingèd chariot hurrying near.”

So stay tuned. The ride isn’t over . . . just yet. 🎧

2025

SPERDVAC OFFICIAL BALLOT TALLY

Total Ballots Voted – 114

Larry Gassman.....	107
Sean Dougherty	105
Walden Hughes	99
Zach Eastman	93
Corey Harker	85
Constance Campanella	74
James Scully.....	60
Robert Garrison	58
Phil Oldham	55
Michael Hingson	52
Don Richards	28

WRITE-IN CANDIDATES

Bobb Lynes.....	1
Barbara Watkins	1
Stuart Lubin	1
Timothy Knofer	1
Robert Tevis.....	1
Phil Proctor.....	1
John Gassman	1

Sandra Hughes
Elections Chair

Election results certified by board of directors at the March 17, 2025, meeting. Officers are listed on page 2.

spervac



BEFORE COMPUTERS THERE WAS RADIO!

And the best place to learn all about the golden age or radio is *Radiogram*. Don't miss a single issue of *Radiogram*. Check the back of your *Radiogram* for your membership number and renewal date. You can also give this to your friends who don't use a computer so they can join. New Members can just write the word NEW in the Member Number area. You can always renew your basic membership at www.sperdvac.com using PayPal, but you don't need a computer to be a member of SPERDVAC. Use this form and mail a check to SPERDVAC for \$20.00 to: SPERDVAC, 2625 Middlefield Road #171, Palo Alto, CA 94306.

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