

J. Scott Smart a.k.a. The Fat Man

BY CHARLES LAUGHLIN

Imagine if you will a Friday evening way back in 1948. A young boy sits on the floor with barely concealed impatience in front of the family radio, waiting for his favorite serial to begin. The radio is one of those huge mahogany consoles that you associate with old time radio. It dwarfs the boy.

At 8 o'clock the voice of Charles Irving is heard announcing that the Norwich Pharmaceutical Company, makers of Pepto Bismol and other fine products, is proud to sponsor Dashiell Hammett's most exciting character, "The Fat Man," live from New York.

And who can forget the opening format of that program? Someone steps up to the microphone and says:

There he goes, into that drugstore. He's stepping on the scales. Weight? 237 pounds. Fortune? Danger. Whooooo is it?

And then J. Scott Smart's deep, sonorous tones are heard—the voice the boy has been waiting to hear all day—replying:

THE FAT MAAAAAN!

Although I never had the chance to meet him, I first got to know Jack Smart by way

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of his wonderful voice when I was that boy glued to the radio listening to adventure stories. This was during the 1940s which proved to be the end of the "Golden Age" of radio. Before television became the center of my family's entertainment, we would gather around the radio after dinner to listen to such favorites as "The Lone Ranger," "Sam Spade," "Fibber McGee," Jack Benny, "Gunsmoke," and of course, my favorite, "The Fat Man."

"The Fat Man" premiered on ABC on Monday, January 21, 1946, at 8:30 p.m. as part of a block of four new programs which also included "I Deal in Crime," "Forever Tops," and "Jimmy Gleason's Diner." "The Fat Man" originated in the studios of WJZ in New York and began as a modestly priced sustainer vaguely based upon character ideas in Dashiell Hammett's writings and fleshed out by producer, E.J. ("Mannie") Rosenberg. The announcer was Charles Irving.

The directors for the program were Clark Andrews, creator of "Big Town," and Charles Powers. The main writer for the series was Richard Ellington, but it was also scripted by Robert Sloane, Lawrence Klee and others.

The veteran character actor Ed Begley was featured as Sgt. O'Hara. Regulars on the program included Betty Garde, Paul Stewart, Linda Watkins, Mary Patton as Lila North, and Vicki Vola, also the female lead in "Mr. District Attorney." Amzie Strickland played the ingenue, Cathy Evans, and Nell Harrison played Runyon's mother during the early episodes. The cast also included Dan Ocko, Rolly Bester (wife of Alfred Bester, the science fiction writer), and Robert Dryden.



J. SCOTT SMART *also known as THE FAT MAN*

An eleven-piece orchestra was on hand to provide live music, and was directed by Bernard Green, who also wrote that memorably stirring theme. The sound effects were by Ed Blaney, who actually did drop a coin in a change slot each week for the sound of the drug store scale.

"The Fat Man" did not remain a sustainer for long. The show increased from 8.1 % to 23.6% of the radio audience in its first year. This steady climb in popularity caught the attention of Norwich Pharmaceutical Company's advertising brass. They wanted a venue to advertise their Pepto Bismol, a product that had been introduced in 1935. But they had an earlier bad experience with radio advertising in England, and were reluctant to try it again. Despite this reluctance, an advertising package was worked out sometime in the fall of 1946 and Norwich sponsorship of "The Fat Man" began on February 14, 1947.

Promotion kits were given to Norwich

salesmen which included scenes from "The Fat Man" adventures and a personally autographed picture of Jack as Brad Runyon. The salesmen would use the autographed picture as evidence that they knew Runyon personally and that he was a great guy. The program was moved to a more favorable slot on Friday night at 8:00 among a block of higher-rated mystery programs. This move increased the ratings even more.

The sponsors pushed Pepto Bismol two out of every three weeks, while on the third week one of the other Norwich products (Unguentine, Swav, etc.) were advertised. Announcers Charles Irving or Gene Kirby would first step to the microphone, accompanied by a harp-

ist, and do his "You'll feel GOOD again!" bit, and he would be back in mid-program with another commercial and say, "Now, let's catch up with the Fat Man," thereby emphasizing Brad Runyon's speed and agility.

Brad Runyon, the "Fat Man," was a character completely opposite to "The Thin Man," who, as anyone into detective fiction knows, was another popular character actually based upon a Hammett novel. Where Nick Charles, the "Thin Man," was a tall, suave, married, aristocratic, martini-sipping amateur, Brad Runyon was a short, heavy, hard-fisted, charming and sensitive professional. He was closer in some respects to yet another successful Hammett character running on radio at the time, "Sam Spade"—a character based upon Hammett's detective in the *Maltese Falcon*.

According to William F. Nolan, Dashiell Hammett, faced with a writer's block, decided to cash in on the popularity of his

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"Thin Man" series which ran on radio from 1946 through 1951 on CBS, and created "The Fat Man." Just how much of the "creation" was Hammett's, and how much that of others who were commercially involved in radio seems to be an open question. Diane Johnson feels that Hammett was already involved with the producer, E.J. Rosenberg, who had also sold the "Sam Spade" series and who "helped develop another series, 'The Fat Man,' inspired by Gutman of *The Maltese Falcon*...." However, Nolan's view is that Brad Runyon was not a copy of Casper Gutman, but was more a mixture of the urbane Nick Charles with the hardboiled Continental Op., another of Hammett's better known characters. Besides, Gutman was a heavy, and not anything like the Brad Runyon character. John Dunning, another old-time radio authority, gives the creative credit to Hammett. Hammett made more money when the "Sam Spade" series aired from 1941-1950 starring Howard Duff.

Hammett refused to get immersed in writing or giving critiques of any of the radio shows based on his characters. How much money he received for his radio shows is uncertain. Julian Symons says that "The Fat Man" brought him \$1300 a week. Nolan says all the radio shows paid him upwards of \$6000 a month. Hammett's attitude toward all these programs was cynical. He is quoted by Johnson as saying, "My sole duty in regard to these programs, is to look in the mail for a check once a week. I don't even listen to them. If I did, I'd complain about how they were being handled, and then I'd fall into the trap of being asked to come down and help. I don't want to have anything to do with the radio. It's a dizzy world, makes the movies seem highly intellectual."

Hammett had nothing to do with select-

ing Jack Smart for the part of Brad Runyon. But it is not hard to understand how Jack landed it. He was a natural as Brad Runyon. Not that he was a detective buff. Quite the contrary. He never read detective stories or went to see detective movies. In fact, because he only read as a soporific, he found dusters more to his liking. No, he was a cinch for the part because, as he would often say, "it takes a fat man to sound like a fat man." And Jack was indeed a fat man. Where Brad Runyon weighed-in at a relatively svelte 237 pounds (or 239 pounds, or 241 pounds, depending on which episode you listened to), Jack himself tipped the scales at around 270 pounds, which, considering it was distributed over a 5 foot, 9-inch frame, meant that he measured up to the part with plenty to spare.

Jack was quite aware of, and more importantly, honestly upfront about the assets and limitations of being rotund. Indeed, he was quite concerned to transform our stereotypical views of fat people. And the role of "The Fat Man" gave him a heaven-sent opportunity to air his views.

In a guest column he wrote for Don Tranter in the *Buffalo Courier-Express* on July 25, 1947, Jack revealed some of his feelings about being fat (incidentally, photos of Jack show that he was not overweight as a boy—he put on weight after quitting football and taking up having a milkshake and peanut butter sandwich for lunch). With regard to his role as Brad Runyon, he wrote, "For here, at last, is a sympathetic approach to a fat man, and weighed down with all the mental hazards of a fat boy, naturally I am out to make our side appear more attractive.... For it's certainly true that, like the Brad Runyon I play every Friday night, I don't feel fat—I feel thin—until I look into a full-length mirror or step on the scales. The trick seems to be with fat people, that you have to balance more favorable characteristics with your bulk as it



JACK SMART broadcasting live and providing his own juicy sound effects in an episode of "The Fat Man."

is visible to the naked eye. Brad Runyon does this in the script by thinking fast, chivalrously helping ladies in distress, and compensating for his weight by a deft display of charm....You know very well how easy it is to laugh at a fat man. He has been the target of jokes and ridicule for centuries. To appear less absurd fat men have developed the habit of 'playing along with the gag,' joining the fun, instead of taking offense. Of course, this is a form of defense; most of us are shy, deep down, and we try hard not to let people know it." He notes that like most fat people he actually eats very little, but he loves cooking all sorts of food. He even contributed recipes to several cookbooks.

Brad Runyon's quick wit was in fact Jack's own and is evident when one listens to the episodes. When jibed by a "baddy" on one program about his weight, the Fat Man snarls back, "the only difference between you and me, Rudolph, is that my fat is from the neck down."

Jack was active in assembling the final

script, revising the plot, cutting material he didn't like, and even helping select supporting cast. In fact he had it written into his contract that he would receive a copy of a script two weeks before it was to air so that he could blue-line and change lines before it was finalized. This was an important factor in the quality of the series, for there were several writers over the years and those were the days before there were "continuity" people whose job it was to make sure that scripts did not contradict one another. Jack performed this continuity function very well.

What a casual listener would not know, of course, was that Jack would often change the names of characters in the script to those of his friends. One of his friends who was a fisherman at the time tuned in to "The Fat man" one night only to find that he and his boat had been lost at sea. And another of his friends became a nightclub owner in the episode, "Murder Plays Hide and Seek."

He was also free to develop both the character of Brad Runyon, and the repetitive features of the program that made them so commanding as hallmarks. Take for example Jack's emphasis upon the word "murder-r-r." He only says it that way as a fluke at the end of the premiere episode of the series entitled "The 19th Pearl." But within weeks, all of Jack's friends had associated his role with saying the word "murder-r-r" in that distinctly sinister way. So within the first few episodes, the beginning of the program has the Fat Man giving a prologue that always ended with "murder-r-r," or "murder-err," said in just that way. Take for example the prologue from the episode entitled "Murder Is the Medium" which was broadcast on July 22, 1949:

To most people a zoo is a collection of four-footed animals. But there's one menagerie I know of where the inmates walk

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on two feet. In the first cage, for instance, you'll find a giant forger whose specialty is writing other peoples' names. And in another iron cell you can inspect the genus "pickpocket," known also as the "little dip," who can sometimes prove that the hand is quicker than the eye. But the prize exhibit is a hopped-up character with a nervous twitch in his forefinger. He prowls alone when he looks for prey, and he's know for his taste for. . .murder-r-r."

The ironic association of a pleasant place or activity—in this case a zoo—with an evil place or activity—here a prison—became a common element in both the monologues and epilogues of each episode. And so associated with the character of the Fat Man does the word "murder-r-r" become that Jack slipped it in for its tongue-in-cheek effect at the end of the movie version of the series.

By the time the Brad Runyon role came around, Jack was already a veteran stage, movie and radio actor, and he had the stage actor's contempt for radio. At times he could be downright cynical about how things were done in the broadcasting industry. For instance, he once suggested that it would have run true to form for ABC to hire a "scrawny stringbean with a thin, asthmatic voice to convey the impression of weight over the air." And [his widow] Mary-Leigh reports that he used to call himself a "high-priced whore" for having to do radio work to support himself. Yet he was utterly convincing at the roles he played because he was so accomplished in his craft.

Jack continued to do stage, movie and radio work for a time after starting "The Fat Man." He was both in summer stock in Long Beach and completed his part in the filming of *Kiss of Death* in New York during 1946. But by 1947 he had dropped out

of other commitments, presumably because he had begun to make some real money for a change. It was during 1947 that he moved his residence permanently to Ogunquit, Maine.

After moving to Ogunquit, Jack would commute by air from Boston to New York to work on "The Fat Man." Although he could have flown and returned on the same day, he was afraid of what the weather might do and that the plane might get into New York late, so he would fly the day before the broadcast, stay overnight at The Players, attend the rehearsal in the afternoon and the show at night, fly back to Boston that night and be back in Ogunquit by 1 a.m. At first he would drive to Boston from Ogunquit and leave his car at Logan Airport, but after he and Mary-Leigh were married, she would drop him off and pick him up.

"The Fat Man" lasted for six seasons.

The show never lost its popularity, and by the end of the series J. Scott Smart had become a household name. One can still find many people old enough to have listened to the program that can readily associate Jack's stage name with "The Fat Man."

What actually killed the program were politics pure and simple. In 1950 Dashiell Hammett, who was peripherally involved in leftist politics, ran afoul of the House UnAmerican Activities Committee when he refused to give names of other activists. He was tried and imprisoned for his failure to cooperate with the Committee and was blacklisted along with the many other fine artists and entertainers who fell victim to the anti-communist hysteria of the day. And, as William Nolan mentions, all of his radio shows were cancelled because they had become tainted. Norwich, being ever-mindful of its public image, was quick to withdraw its sponsorship of "The Fat Man," and the program became once again



PORTRAIT OF J. SCOTT SMART, one of a set of professional pictures he had taken in 1958 as he prepared to begin the search for his next role. Photo by John R. Kennedy.

a sustainer for its last season—with companies like Clorets partially paying the bills. Universal-International, in its efforts to distance itself from any stigma caused by the association of Hammett with the imagined Communist scourge, removed his name from the titles of *The Fat Man* movie. It seems likely that they only released the picture at all because it was already in the can by the time the full implications of Hammett's situation dawned on them.

In any event, all of this was immensely frustrating to a fairly apolitical Jack Smart who was hoping both for a longer run of the radio show and a series of *Fat Man* movies to equal the success of William Powell and Myrna Loy in the *Thin Man* films. But this was not to be, and we only have the one film upon which to judge what a full series of them might have been like.

The 77-minute film, *The Fat Man* was completed by Universal-International on August 21, 1950, was previewed at the Ritz Theater, Los Angeles on March 26, 1951,

and released in May 1951.

The film was remarkable in many respects. Jack was superb, of course, as Brad Runyon. He should have been, considering that by this time he was 48-years old and a veteran actor with something like 25 years of entertainment industry experience under his very long belt. And, of course, there was that incredible voice that sounded like a well seasoned oboe. One visitor to the Universal studios during the filming of *The Fat Man* referred to his voice as “a male Mae West.” And not only that, there was finally a face to go along with the voice for the fans. The movie put Jack's face together with the Fat Man role, and for the first time people recognized Jack on the street. People would come up to him wherever he was and ask, “Can I have your autograph Mr. Runyon?” Friends wondered if being asked for autographs bothered him and he would say, “No, the time to worry is when they don't ask you for autographs.”

Most critics praised the movie as a whole, although a few were critical of the story line (or lack thereof) while praising the direction and the acting. The pacing of scenes was quite interesting, as were some of the photographic effects. At one point there was actually a flashback within a flashback, the first time I have ever encountered that in a movie. *The Hollywood Reporter* of March 30, 1951, notes, “J. Scott Smart is physically perfect for the colorful title role and performs with a naturalness which makes his portrayal convincing.”

The radio series ended in 1951 and J. Scott Smart died on January 15, 1960. His contribution to the “Golden Age of Radio” was significant. He exhibited the flexibility of speech and range of psychological nuances that made it possible for him to fill the requirements of radio drama with ease.

He was the immortal Brad Runyon, “The Fat Man.” ■