

# THE BOY FROM DO WAH DITTY

BY BILL OATES



During the glory days of his radio career, Phil Harris often hinted to his favorite place on earth as “Do Wah Ditty.” He never actually identified the exact place in his song “That’s What I Like About the South,” but in his biography there may be a clue.

The first possible site for the inspiration of his now famous tune may have been his birthplace and boyhood home, Linton, Indiana, where an only child was born to Dollie and Harry Harris on June 24, 1904.

Phil’s musical talents came in part from his father, a clarinetist who often traveled with circuses, tent shows, and to theater pit orchestras. Mother Harris also played in a variety of musical venues, where she performed as a singer. When the boy was old enough, the Harris trio toured with the father playing “character comedy,” the mother singing, and Phil acting the part of “Jew comedian.” In order to give young Phil a sense of a home, his mobile parents deposited him with his maternal grandparents when mom and dad were on tour. A few years after Phil’s birth, however, Dollie decided to settle down and traded show business for a job in a Linton clothing store.

When his father migrated to different musical jobs, Grandpa Allen Wright became Phil’s male role model. “Sug”

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*Bill Oates, of Kouts, Indiana, a high school English teacher and author with a love of old time radio, is a regular contributor to these pages.*

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Wright, a local policeman, distinguished himself during the Civil War. Even though he was originally from Harrison County, Indiana, he fought for the Confederacy. After the old veteran retired, he was often found in a local general store run by a Union veteran. As the two argued the plaudits of both sides, delighted children like Phil listened on enthusiastically.

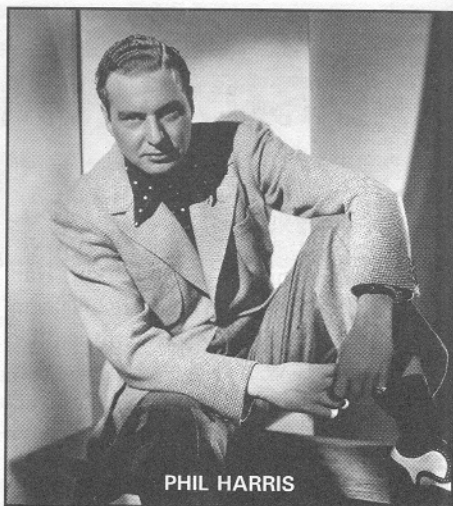
As for an education, Phil Harris’s main lessons were learned at the handle end of guns and fishing rods. Hunting rabbits in nearby Haseman’s Grove, and fishing or catching frogs helped occupy his time when he wasn’t collecting hickory nuts, walnuts or persimmons. His in-class records show that he was a pretty decent student, although he often played hooky and was not above mischief. Even when his family moved to a permanent home in Nashville, Tennessee, where Phil finished

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his formal schooling, he continued to avoid the classroom to go fishing. Once his father found out that the boy was skipping school, the elder Harris escorted Phil to the high school front door every day. Unfortunately, the building also had a back door that led to the river.

Even though his public education ended without a degree, Phil's interest in music continued. (Ironically, years later Franklin College and Vincennes University conferred on him honorary doctorates.) When he finally bid a formal good bye to schooling in Nashville, the location where his father found permanent work as a musician at the Nickerbocker Theatre, the dropout did so to form a band. In the long run it was the better choice. The boy had been introduced to the drums ten years earlier, where his first paid jobs included accompanying films in a combo comprised of himself, a lady on the piano, and another on the violin at Linton's silent movie houses. Locals were relieved when Phil graduated to actual drums after he occupied much of his time banging on tin cans suspended from trees. Once he became adept at the drumsticks, he added sirens, guns, and a variety of items to enhance the viewers' appreciation of the film.

As a teenager, Phil Harris left his schooling to help form the Dixie Syncopators. He also filled in on the drums where his father was employed. Former movie star Ruth Stonehouse, who was touring in her own stage act, heard the teenagers and took them along. After arriving at their final gig at her home in Denver, the group was offered a chance to play in Honolulu. However, the boys did not believe the promoter's offer, and they returned to Nashville. The patron again contacted them and they eventually departed Tennessee for the Princess Theatre and the beaches



at Waikiki. After their engagement ended, the band broke up, and all but Phil returned home.

San Francisco rebuilt into a beautiful travel destination after the great earthquake of 1906. It became a premiere city on the West Coast and offered two important outlets — hotels and radio stations — for musicians' talents in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Phil found his way into a variety of bands, learned to love the city, and made important connections in the musical community. His most important attachment was to a number of musicians who were bound for a two-year stint in Australia. Why the long trip to Down Under? Australians developed a fondness for American jazz, but they had no home grown groups to play the then popular music. A group of first chair musicians, including later famed radio sidekick Frank Remley, embarked to lead the Aussies in their quest to learn music popular in the States. In other words, a whole band was outfitted with key Americans to inspire the locals.

On his return to America, Phil was ready to form his first important organization, the Lofner-Harris orchestra.

The Lofner-Harris band offered listeners a less mellow alternative to the then

popular "crooner" style of dance music. With Harris on the drums, Carol Lofner led the band primarily at the St. Francis Hotel from 1929 until 1932. Many of radio's soon-to-be names, such as Xavier Cugat, Bill Goodwin, Harold "Gildersleeve" Peary, Meredith Willson, and Al Pearce, were also playing San Francisco clubs and appearing on NBC's West Coast hub stations. By 1932, Phil Harris achieved enough confidence to form a band under his own name and opened at the Ambassador Hotel's famed Cocoanut Grove in Los Angeles. This hotel stint was well-timed, because band remotes soon featured the Phil Harris Orchestra from the hotel, and, in a few years, not only West Coast programs would move to southern California, but also many of the nationwide network shows would also emanate from Los Angeles.

With his popularity growing in the 1930's, Phil Harris found himself touring, starring in his own radio show *Let's Listen to Harris* for Cutex Nail Polish on NBC, being featured in Sara Hamilton's "Hollywood at Play" column in the July 1933 Photoplay magazine, and acting in the 1933 Academy Award comedy short winner *So This Is Harris* (RKO). He also began a feature film career with *Melody Cruise* (RKO 1933) that later included *Man About Town* (RKO 1939), *Buck Benny Rides Again* (Paramount 1940), and *The Wheeler Dealers* (MGM 1963.) In the first feature, Phil Harris etched his playboy persona in celluloid when he played a millionaire who has designing women kept at bay by Charles Ruggles. Phil Harris's first two outings on film were also noteworthy because famed director Mark Sandrich guided them as two of his earliest creations.

During the early years of movie making, Harris came to the attention of rising comedian Jack Benny.

Before he made his hit on network ra-



dio, Harris traveled to New York clubs. The handsome wavy haired bandleader who wowed Southern California audiences repeated his success in The Big Apple. The band even broke up temporarily, but after a reconciliation, the group continued performing stronger than ever. Ultimately, the musical aggregation hooked up with a hotel chain and toured from New York to big cities as far west as Texas and then back again.

After these successes, comedian George Burns beckoned Harris to come from the Roosevelt Hotel in New Orleans to be the bandleader on the Burns and Allen Show. After breaking the engagement, Harris left Louisiana for Los Angeles. But in the meantime, Burns' producer gave the job to Wayne King and Harris found himself out West with no job.

Enter Burns' best friend Jack Benny, who took Harris out to eat and then queried the bandleader as to what show he would be on during the upcoming season. Benny and Harris had become friends earlier when the two were in New York, and when Phil responded that he was not contracted to any program, Benny said, "Well, you're with me."

Jack Benny had his first network radio program in 1932, but he went though a

number of orchestra leaders until Phil Harris was placed under contract.

On October 4, 1936, Phil Harris debuted on the first show of the season with little fanfare. Essentially, Jack Benny merely referred to the new cast member repeatedly. On this show, Jack mistakenly and intentionally announced Phil with "Play, Don," a reference to earlier bandleaders Bestor and Green. Even though Phil was underplayed on the early episodes of the program, his raucous role as resident bon vivant soon emerged.

The young, curly-haired bandleader became a recognized fixture on the program alongside venerable announcer Don Wilson, female sidekick Mary Livingston, long suffering valet Rochester, and tenor Dennis Day. After sixteen years on the show, Phil admitted that Jack Benny was extremely generous (despite their usually confrontational on air relationship.) Also of great importance, the radio program gave the bandleader an opportunity to establish a permanent home for the first time in his professional career.

Just as Don Wilson became the quintessential Benny announcer, Phil Harris became the oft-maligned drunken leader of his musical rabble, whose tunes were catchy and expert nonetheless.

Not long after Phil joined the Benny show, he claimed that he helped another of the enduring cast. According to Phil, he got hold of Eddie "Rochester" Anderson and told the aspiring actor that the show was looking for Black actors with a Southern accent. Anderson dropped all formal pronunciations and thanks to Phil, got the job. Phil also made sure that Anderson traveled with the band members when the show toured, so that he would be included in all meals. According to Anderson, "If it hadn't been for Harris, I'd still be eating

Chinese" (the only restaurants that readily accepted minorities.)

Over the years, Phil's character (and that of his band) evolved into that of irresponsible, drunken hooligans. Nothing could be further than the truth. Given the rigors of performing under the half-hour comedy clock, the music had to fit the network's time limitations. Often, when the show was running long, because too many laughs emanated from the audience or the response to a joke held on longer than expected, the band had to adjust accordingly. If a band were to play a Saturday night remote with fewer restrictions that was one thing, but to end a half-hour comedy show reasonably close to the appointed final second was a more complex matter. Few bands were able to last as long on such a show as did Phil Harris's band.

Over the years, as was the case with most of the Benny cast members, stereotypes were established. Once Phil Harris burst onto the scene, he eventually took his speaking part on the show, a phenomenon that was relatively revolutionary for bandleaders on radio in the late 1930's. His entrances became flamboyant, egotistical poetry to signal that the real magnet for the audience was on board, much to the chagrin of Benny. One program's plot simply opens with Jack's exasperation over Phil's absence from the February 17, 1946 show. Mary opens the dialogue with Jack, and soon thereafter she has to read Phil's lines in the bandleader's seeming absence. Later when he arrives, his opening line is the typical Harris braggadocio:

*OK, folks, here's your favorite pixie,*

*Harris is here and he's right out of Dixie.*

After his bombastic entrance, he went into his joke:

**JACK:** *What did the wallpaper say to the wall?*

**PHIL:** *You may be a little cracked, but I've got designs on you. (Oh, Harris, they ought*





to put a slot in your head, because your brains are like money in the bank.)

While Phil Harris bounded into the evening's story line, so too did the reputations of his notorious musicians. The greatest character to receive abuse for his hard drinking and irresponsibility was real guitarist and long time friend, Frankie Remley. When Harris broke into NBC with his own show in 1946, Remley's character as a musical sidekick received a voice from veteran actor Elliott Lewis.

Because *The Jack Benny Program* often relied on running gags, the core of the February 29, 1948 program revolved around Phil's popular song "That's What I Like About the South." The opening of the show involves Jack and his on air girlfriend Gladys Obispo's sojourn to a lunch counter for a sardine sandwich. On arrival at "the show's rehearsal," Jack attempts to have Phil explain his song. Having believed that he made his point that the lyrics were implausible, Jack moves on to a discussion with Rochester, who validates the seeming fictitious locations and people in the lyrics.

It was not uncommon for Jack Benny to

accommodate projects that involved his cast members. When Phil was unable to travel with Jack Benny, a variety of orchestras filled in. On many occasions, such as the time Meredith Willson wielded the baton, jokes were written to emphasize what a nice change it was to have such a down-to-earth replacement for Phil. Ironically, during a 1943 tour, Bob Crosby substituted as the show's bandleader, a foreshadowing of Phil's permanent replacement nine years later. Perhaps the most generous gift to his cast occurred when Dennis Day, Mel Blanc, and Phil Harris obtained their own shows on NBC. *The Phil Harris-Alice Faye Show* was the most successful.

The half-hour comedy based on the real life marriage of Phil Harris and Alice Faye resulted as a spin-off of their stint on the *Fitch Bandwagon*, a Sunday night show that followed Jack Benny. Starting in 1937 as a primarily musical program with comic bits, Harris and Faye joined the cast in 1946 to reinvent the format while including their domestic trials and tribulations in skit form. Elliott Lewis joined the cast as Remley at the real guitarist's request, and Walter Tetley became the smart talking neighbor kid, Julius. As the Fitch show faded in 1948, the Rexall program with Alice and Phil replaced it. Still following the Benny program on Sunday nights, the new situation comedy debuted on October 3 and began a successful run for the next six years.

The chance meeting of the famous bandleader and the glamorous singer resulted when Alice's Dobermans attacked Phil's Doberman. Alice had met Phil years earlier when he was leading Rudy Vallee's orchestra and she was singing with it. She was married to Tony Martin in the interim but was divorced from the singer by the time the dog fiasco occurred. After sufficient sleuthing, Phil endeavored to confront the owner of the vicious beasts. Upon meeting the animal's master, Phil's con-

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cerns for the dog mellowed, and he romantically pursued the owner.

On May 12, 1941, the two eloped to Mexico. What was to have been an elaborate Hollywood wedding was replaced with an impromptu ceremony south of the border. When it was discovered that Alice had no bouquet, some of the couple's friends ran to a nearby vegetable market and made a grouping of cauliflower, carrots, and lettuce. The following September the two wed again, this time in Galveston, Texas, to make sure the union was legal. Many of her friends warned her that the marriage would not last, but the couple remained together until Phil's death in 1995.

The key to the success of the program reflected the relationship the real husband and wife enjoyed. By 1945, she gave up a lucrative but tiresome film career to become a wife and mother. This new role was quite ironic, for Phil actually had the domestic skills needed to run a house. Because Alice had been in show business so long, the film companies cared for her needs. She did not even have a driver's license when she married Phil. Whenever she needed a ride before, a studio limousine was sent for her. However, because radio acting was not as rigorous as filmmaking, she agreed to return to work and perform over the airwaves.

Her role became that of the savvy yet unmechanical wife, while Phil assumed the part of the bumbling husband who was bent on engaging in a variety of nefarious activities often concocted by Remley. Young Julius often tagged along to give what he believed was helpful advice to the big kids who were often trying to get out of trouble and to avoid Alice's wrath. In addition, real life Harris daughters Phyllis and Alice were added to the cast but were played by Jeanine Roose and Anne Whitfield.

Few realized that one of the reasons for



the show's longevity lay in Phil's guiding and critical hand, which was not always apparent to the listening audience. Sometimes the program even included touching moments. Numbered among the show's listeners was President Harry Truman, who invited the couple to entertain at his 1948 inaugural ball. In later interviews, Phil Harris was often asked why his radio show was not adapted for television. The show was popular enough on the radio, and theme programs like *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* had set a precedent for this type of family show. But Phil decided that the successful radio show should stand as its own, and so it expired in 1954 after a successful run.

While Phil was bidding Jack Benny a "Good bye, Jackson," as he exited the first of the two Sunday night programs, he was preparing to go to another studio to do his own show. Harris remarked that Jack Benny was extremely generous to his employee by letting him take an early leave from the premiere radio show of the day. It was a challenge for Phil to move from one script to the next, and it became even more difficult when Benny moved to CBS in 1949, when the transfer involved run-

ning from one network to another in the same amount of time. Fortunately for Phil and Jack, by the time the two were working for rival companies, the Benny program was well oiled enough to allow one of Phil's underlings to assume the director's place and finish the show. What was not expected was Phil's painful dismissal from the show in 1951.

For the 1951-52 radio season, many radio programs were forced to make budget cuts. Even the powerful *Jack Benny Program* needed to make such concessions, and for its last four seasons, the popular program included fewer guest stars and Bob Crosby replaced Phil Harris as the orchestra leader.

When Phil was honored on the television show *This is Your Life*, Jack Benny graciously appeared in honor of his old friend. Years later Phil Harris continued to praise his boss who gave the bandleader his big break in radio and referred to the time as "sixteen wonderful years."

After the *Phil Harris-Alice Faye Show* left radio, Phil actively continued entertaining. He was the guest on a variety of television shows like the *Kraft Music Hall*, the *Hollywood Palace*, *The Dean Martin Show*, *Here's Lucy* and the *Love Boat*, to name a few. He even starred in his own hour long special in 1959. He displayed his love for hunting and fishing, when he appeared on shows like *American Sportsman* and *Outdoor Life*. During the 1950's he acted in a number of films, including *Wabash Avenue*, *Here Comes the Groom*, *The Wild Blue Yonder*, *Starlift*, and *The High and the Mighty*.

In 1967 he entered a new phase of entertaining, when he gave voice to Baloo the bear in Walt Disney's *The Jungle Book* animated feature and received an Oscar nomination for his song "The Bare Necessities."

Phil Harris developed an affinity for playing golf seriously. He became a fix-

ture at Bing Crosby's Pebble Beach Clambake and won the event in 1951. After Crosby died, Phil assumed the role as color commentator.

When the "Phil Harris Festival" was established in his Linton, Indiana home town, Phil's own golf tourney with celebrities was included as a fundraiser and eventually became the third largest pro-am tourney in the country.

In March 1979, a moving van, filled with most of the Harris-Faye memorabilia, arrived at the Linton, Indiana library. Regina Kramer of the Linton Library catalogued and oversaw hundreds of items, which provides entertainment scholars with a great deal of the information like that which is used here.

From that moment, his hometown endeavored to honor Phil Harris with an annual festival, and, as a result, the Phil Harris Scholarship began in Linton. Phil agreed to such a festival on three counts: it must be a vehicle to raise money for students in his home town, he was able to organize the celebrities and the variety show, and it had to be close to Indianapolis 500 time, so that he could make one big trip back to his home state and do double duty.

On August 11, 1995, Phil Harris departed the earthly stage that he had entered thousands of times. Perhaps the "Do Wah Ditty" he often heralded was inspired by his idyllic hometown in Indiana, and it may also have had its roots in Nashville, where the young drummer matured as a bandleader. Probably it was a mix of these two elements and the home he and Alice enjoyed in California for over six decades. Regardless of its location, the fictitious place undoubtedly also had a place in his heart for his long time spouse, Alice, (who died three years later, on May 9, 1998).

Their mark on American entertainment was long and wide and is fortunately preserved for future generations to enjoy. ■