

HONORING THE CLASSICS FOR 25 YEARS**Chuck Schaden's Radio Days**

BY DENNIS POLKOW

It is Saturday afternoon, and Chuck Schaden is doing what he has done every Saturday afternoon for as long as he can remember: He's sitting back and listening to old-time radio programs.

Appearances to the contrary, Schaden claims that he grew up with radio being no more or less important to him than it was to anyone else growing up in the 1940s.

"The radio was the center of a house," he says, checking over some index cards while his "Those Were The Days" radio audience is listening to a BBC re-enactment of a 1932 episode of a Marx Brothers' Flywheel, Shyster and Flywheel radio show. "It was where you turned to learn what was happening in the world, and it was where the family would gather after dinner to enjoy an evening's entertainment together. My family was really no different than any other in that respect."

So how did Chuck Schaden end up becoming the nostalgia guru of old-time radio?

"Quite by accident," he explains. "It was somewhere around the early 1960s and I suddenly found that I was really missing radio big time. Radio had changed so much and most of the old radio shows had made unsuccessful transitions to television and then just disappeared. Television began

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fulfilling the role that radio once had, but television was a different medium."

So Jack Benny was really that much better on radio than on television?

"Well, that's one of a handful who made the transition work," Schaden admits, "but even Benny was more vivid on the radio."

More vivid?

"You know, when they first showed Jack Benny's bank vault on television," Schaden recalls, "letters poured in saying, 'No, no, you've got it all wrong: The vault was much deeper, much larger, the walls were this way and that.' Each member of the listening audience had an elaborate mental image of what that vault looked like from having 'seen' it in their imagination over the years on the radio. With radio, listeners supplied their own set of pictures."

And it is that quality, among others, that keeps Schaden's rabidly loyal audience of listeners tuning in. "Thanks a lot," Schaden says to a telephone caller off the air, "I really appreciate that."

Larry Peters has been answering phone calls in the studio all afternoon, but often, much to the surprise and delight of callers, Schaden himself picks up the phone.

"That was a 27-year old who just subscribed to the Nostalgia Digest," Schaden explains, "and he made the very point we were just talking about: That he loves to 'watch' old time radio programs." Schaden says he hears the same thing over and over again from younger listeners.

"You had two things happening when television came in," he says. "First, even

though we all thought television would be this huge improvement in our lives, the images were always a disappointment. Remember, radio stars were chosen for their voices, not their looks, so you imagined characters looking a certain way when you heard them. Most of the voices didn't physically look at all the way that they sounded, and so other actors and actresses were brought in that 'looked' the part.

"Add to that the fact that the original writers were seldom involved and that several sponsors were needed for a television program, and suddenly networks were in charge of programming. This meant moving shows around and worrying more about ratings. In the radio days, a sponsor would let a show develop and the night and time a given show was on became an institution. Nowadays, even if you find a good television show — and they are out there — a network will play games with you by changing nights and times, or by breaking up a plot sequence with a series of reruns. Suddenly, a character who was killed off in the last episode is back alive again. It's absurd."

So how did Schaden "rediscover" old time radio?

"I was in New York, and came across a guy who had reel to reel tapes of some shows," he says. "They were quite expensive, but I bought a couple."

Does Schaden remember what they were?



**THOSE WERE THE DAYS HOST CHUCK SCHADEN HANGS OUT WITH HIS PORTRAIT, WHICH HANGS IN THE RADIO HALL OF FAME AT CHICAGO'S MUSEUM OF BROADCAST COMMUNICATIONS.**

"You bet," he says. "One was Orson Welles' 'War of the Worlds' broadcast, and the other was an episode of Fibber McGee and Molly."

"Then I would hear about other collectors who had other tapes, and you'd swap with them. One of the advantages of old-time radio as a collectable is that, unlike stamp collecting where you would have to actually give up a stamp to trade it in, I can make copies of a tape and keep a program as well as trade it."

From those humble beginnings, Schaden says that his current collection is some 50,000 shows, all housed in a special archive at the Museum of Broadcast Communications, which Schaden helped found in 1988 and which is also the site of his "Those Were The Days" studio.

"See that guy over there?" Schaden says quietly off the air. "He's here every Saturday afternoon. He just brings his paper and sits and listens while we do the show."

## CHUCK SCHADEN'S RADIO DAYS

"Hi Chuck," says another passing visitor, "here's a list of the sound effects we're using for tomorrow." The gentleman is one of the radio lovers who will help re-enact a live radio script the next day. There are several groups that do this on a regular basis, all under Schaden's own guidance.

"As my collection of radio programs grew," Schaden continues, "so did my interest in sharing them. That's the real joy of a hobby, sharing it with others. My family and friends certainly enjoyed the shows, but there's only so many times you can invite the same people over on a Saturday night to listen to them.

"So in 1970, I had a chance to go on the air for a small station in Evanston and jumped at it, and stayed there until the station changed ownership in 1975."

It was at that point that Schaden took "Those Were The Days" to Classical radio station WNIB (97.1 FM) every Saturday

afternoon from 1-5pm, which has been the show's home for two decades since.

A year later, Schaden opened Metro Golden Memories, his "showbiz nostalgia" shop on the Northwest side which began in response to listeners constantly asking him where they could buy tapes of old radio programs.

"I always figured people who were collectors would just tape the shows," says Schaden, "but many people wanted copies made for them, so we opened the store as a place for them to go."

These days, Metro Golden Memories also carries still photos and movie posters, entertainment memorabilia, video cassettes of classic movies and television shows, and of course, audio cassettes of old-time radio programs.

Likewise, the *Nostalgia Digest and Radio Guide* began in response to listeners who wanted detailed information about the shows that he was playing.

"It began as simply a list of programs with brief descriptions," recalls Schaden, "but having been a journalism major in college, it quickly evolved into a real publication."

Then in 1985, WBBM Newsradio (78 AM) began broadcasting a nightly show of old-time radio hosted by Schaden, which is still on the air. The show is heard across 38 states and Schaden continues to hear approvingly from each of them.

"Two minutes," says Matt Sonnenberg, Schaden's engineer for the past six years. Sonnenberg met "Days" announcer Ken Alexander back when Sonnenberg was supporting himself as an Elmhurst College student working at a book shop in Elmhurst.

"Ken was a regular customer," recalls Sonnenberg, "and it wasn't long before he introduced me to Chuck." Soon Schaden offered Sonnenberg the job of engineer for "Those Were The Days," though



**CHUCK OPENS FIBBER MC GEE'S CLOSET AT THE MUSEUM OF BROADCAST COMMUNICATIONS**



**CHUCK VISITS JACK BENNY'S VAULT EXHIBIT AT MBC**

Sonnenberg had no engineering experience whatsoever.

"Don't worry," said Schaden, "I'll teach you." Sonnenberg describes Schaden as "the nicest guy I ever met," and "a real father figure."

"You have to remember," says Schaden during a commercial break, "these radio programs were broadcast with no thought whatsoever given to their ever being heard again. They were done live, and that was it: Out over the airwaves, and gone.

"The only reason we have the shows that we do is because often a sponsor would ask for a copy of a show, and so an engineer would make a transcription disc. Remember, this is B.T. — 'Before Tape.'"

This is why Schaden is fond of pointing out that, even with his 50,000 shows, it's all still a drop in the bucket of what was actually broadcast.

"I would give my right arm for a 1947

Cubs broadcast," he says. "None of that stuff was saved. No one thought in those terms. There are some shows that were on every week for years and years, and we don't have a single broadcast. Other shows might have been on only a year, but if a sponsor wanted broadcast copies, we have every episode."

Most of the news broadcasts — especially those to do with World War II — were saved, and Schaden began an extraordinary, unprecedented 50th anniversary commemoration of the war in 1991, beginning with Pearl Harbor in December, 1941, continuing right through every week of the war through the anniversary of the war's end next August.

Among the recent highlights was minute by minute coverage of D-Day last June, and a Battle of the Bulge broadcast in December. "Radio was how we learned about all of these events," says Schaden, "and I wanted to provide a *sound* history of that time."

Judging from the response Schaden has received from history teachers, his commemoration is giving kids who weren't there an immediate and otherwise unobtainable sense of what it was like to be alive during the war.

Because he would rather draw attention to old-time radio rather than himself, Schaden is often surprised at the attention that he receives for what he does. This was particularly obvious when he became the favorite write-in choice to join the Radio Hall of Fame a couple of years ago, an honor which deeply moved him.

"I was overwhelmed," he says. "Here I am, a guy who's just trying to keep alive



**CHUCK'S *THOSE WERE THE DAYS* PROGRAM IS BROADCAST LIVE EVERY SATURDAY FROM THE RADIO HALL OF FAME STUDIO AT THE MUSEUM, WHERE VISITORS CAN DROP BY AND LISTEN IN.**

what everyone else has done, and I end up a Hall-of-Famer alongside all of the great old stars of radio. It was an incredible and very emotional experience."

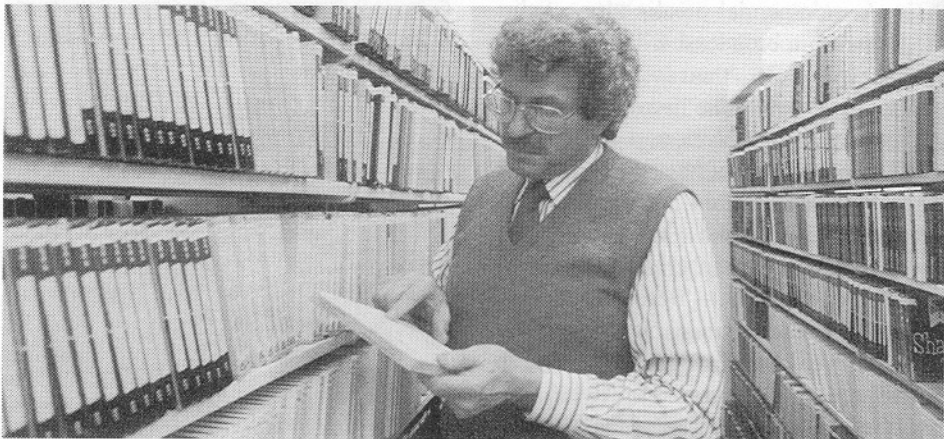
Does Schaden ever worry that after 25 years of looking back at the past, that somehow the present is lost in the shuffle?

"Not at all," he says, "because we live in the present every day: It surrounds us on

the news and everywhere else. What we try to offer is a brief vacation spot from all that, a fun trip to the past.

"And yes," he adds, "it's a great place to visit, but I wouldn't want to live there." ■

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**CHUCK SEARCHES THE RADIO ARCHIVES FOR AN UPCOMING BROADCAST.**