

# King of Spades

BY CLAIR SCHULZ

Although the most famous numbers in radio may have been the 39 of a parsimonious comedian and the 79 of the fun-loving couple who lived on and in Wistful Vista, another set of digits, usually spewed out in rapid succession by a detective as a preface to the story of his latest adventure, also brings back the glow of yesterday to many people. When Samuel Spade dished out his license number 137596, listeners eagerly pulled up close for a big helping of capered caper served exquisitely by the man playing the private eye, Howard Duff.

Duff, who late in life declared that it seemed like he had always been in radio, actually didn't earn his first job in the medium until after graduating from a Seattle high school. By that time he had abandoned his early ambition of becoming a cartoonist and had turned his attention to acting in *Volpone*, *Private Lives*, and other Seattle Repertory Theatre productions.

Duff considered some of his early work on Seattle station KOMO to be that of a disc jockey because his duties consisted

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mainly of playing records, reading commercials, and tossing in patter to fill time until the newscasts which he also read. Later he moved to KFRC in San Francisco where he served as relief announcer.

His first real acting on the air came as the *Phantom Pilot*, an airborne champion of justice who, with the help of a plane called Skyball, swooped down on crooks and captured them like a cowboy hero corralling outlaws with his trusty steed. A lasting benefit of working on the overblown series was that one of the cast members, Elliott Lewis, became a lifelong friend.



Howard Duff

After the *Phantom Pilot* had

been grounded, Arch Oboler came to Duff's aid by putting him in some of his plays. Oboler certainly proved to be a friend in need then, but later, after America entered World War II and Duff received his induction notice, could not deliver on a promise quite in keeping with the power the author believed he wielded. Oboler told Duff he would have the draftee out of the army in 24 hours. Duff did indeed receive his discharge... four years later.

However, another radio contact, Ted Sherdeman, writer of *Latitude Zero*, a landmark but short-lived science fiction show

on which Duff had appeared, used his influence to find a spot for the actor with the Armed Forces Radio Service. Besides editing out commercials from the discs sent to stations for rebroadcast to the military, Duff tapped into his experience as a DJ by introducing musical numbers inserted to fill out "short" programs.

Howard tailored his dialogue to fit the program so that, for example, after Archie finished his weekly sign-off with his employer, Duff fractured a little more English in the same style: "Now, before we leave Duffy's Tavern, leave us put a couple nickels in Duffy's jukebox. Duffy's jukebox, where the feet meet the beat. Well, the platter is spinning, the needle's in the groove, and here's the foist number coming up."

After the war ended, he found work on radio both on dramatic shows and also on lighter fare. In a bit of fluff for *Hollywood Preview* called "Slightly Sixteen" Duff demonstrated that he could insert a little life in the old "man must marry in a hurry to inherit a fortune" plot by playing nicely off Jane Withers.

His appearances on *Suspense* acquainted him with William Spier, the program's producer-director, and may have given him an advantage when Spier held auditions for a series to be based on the exploits of Dashiell Hammett's famous sleuth. Rather than try to imitate Humphrey Bogart, who had starred as Sam Spade in the best-known film version of *The Maltese Falcon*, Duff decided to read the lines with a devil-may-care air which convinced the bearded director that having a tough guy who was also a wise guy might be just what post-war Americans wanted to hear.

*The Adventures of Sam Spade* lived up to its title. Spade didn't handle cases; he ventured off on chases that veered in capricious directions and we went along, holding on tight for the bumps and curves Sam inevitably encountered.



There are few, if any, "serious" programs more pleasurable to listen to than *The Adventures of Sam Spade* and perhaps the principal reason why it is so entertaining is that Duff and Lurene Tuttle, who played Spade's secretary Effie Perrine, enjoyed the roles so thoroughly that their enthusiasm imbued the show with a sense of fun unequalled along Gumshoe Row.

Certainly writers Bob Tallman and Gil Doud deserved some credit for the witty lines, but the banter between Spade and the gallery of eccentrics he met could only be accomplished by an actor who could turn from two-fisted pragmatist to playful joker on a dime. Duff delivered some of the opening teasers, like the one of "The Prodigal Daughter Caper," with the thickest slice of ham this side of East Lynne. He preceded his dictation of "The Death Bed Caper" by launching into "Many brave hearts are asleep in the deep," started down the scale with "so beware, be-e-e-e-e," gave

## KING OF SPADES

the date (June 20, 1948) as if beginning his report, reverted back to the song with an off-key "ware," and added a bold-faced "I have no shame" that made listeners slap their knees and say, "That's our Sam!"

Indeed, it was Spade's (and Duff's) inherent honesty that won our hearts. Usually the discovery of a corpse or a clue preceded the middle commercial, but on "The Hot Hundred Grand Caper" Sam noted wryly that nobody was directing bullets his way or taking swings at his head and grimly confessed, "Not much of a cliffhanger, but the best we could do this week."

The best they could do ranks as some of the most gratifying radio programming produced after WW II. If the part called for him to play Spade relatively straight in a tale of betrayal like "The Dick Foley Caper," Duff adopted a world-weary, "sour racket" mode appropriate for radio noir. Conversely, the farcical "Flopsy, Mopsy, and Cottontail Caper" remains delightful even after repeated playings as Spade manages to keep his humor and dignity intact dressed as a white rabbit chasing red herrings.

The mingling of mystery and mirth constituted a delicate balance and Duff juggled them effortlessly. His tongue-in-cheek remarks never let us forget that he was portraying a gun-in-holster detective who meant business, not funny business.

Duff carried the Spade magic to all three networks at one time or another from 1946 to 1950 and also to other programs. Very likely the best of the hour-long *Suspense* shows is "The Kandy Tooth," a caper which pitted Spade (Duff) against Kasper Gutman (Joseph Kearns), his old adversary from *The Maltese Falcon*. One of the most amusing *Burns and Allen* shows is the episode in which Gracie could not separate Duff from the character he played and had



PHOTOFEEST

Howard arrested. As Spade on *The Joan Davis Show* Duff solved a murder (and got the show's biggest laugh) by announcing that the victim had been fed jumping beans instead of kidney beans and had "been kicked to death from the inside."

Despite the popularity of the program, *The Adventures of Sam Spade* was kicked to death from the outside. Because Hammett, who, according to intimate friend Lillian Hellman, never listened to the show, and Duff, who had signed a document in support of the Hollywood Ten, had been deemed Communist sympathizers, the sponsor of the show, Wildroot, decided to cancel the series. A letter-writing campaign brought the show back to NBC in November of 1950, but without Duff as prime mover the series limped along for six months before expiring.

Unlike others who had been stung by the Red Scare and could not find any kind of employment in the entertainment industry, Duff simply walked around the closed door

of radio and through the open gates of the studios whose producers could always use handsome actors who looked like they knew their way around the block.

After debuting in the prison film *Brute Force*, he moved up to second billing and won accolades as a con man in *Naked City*, then advanced to the head of the class in the stark crime melodramas *Illegal Entry* and *Johnny Stool Pigeon*.

One of the early gems of Duff's career was as Jack Early in *Shakedown* (1950). As an unscrupulous photographer who used his camera for extortion and blackmail, Duff still conveyed enough humanity so that audiences felt a trifle sorry for Early when he was shot by a thug and redeemed himself somewhat before dying by snapping a photo of his killer.

The forthrightness that marked Duff's portrayal of Spade came across the screen as well. Even if his characters were dishonest, his assessment of his own character was not. When he told Colleen Gray, "We're no good" in *Models, Inc.*, we knew we were listening to a heel we could trust to tell it like it is.

Although Duff saddled up in the westerns *Red Canyon*, *Calamity Jane and Sam Bass*, and *Blackjack Ketchum, Desperado*, he seemed out of place in the wide open spaces as if he has taken a wrong turn where the sidewalk of the mean street ends. But when cast in *Women's Prison* as a conscientious doctor or a stalwart defender of a *Woman in Hiding* or a dedicated police lieutenant in *While the City Sleeps* or a waffling detective in *Private Hell 36*, he was back on the beat with his perspicacity still honing in with unflinching accuracy as in *Private Hell 36* when Jack Farnham told Cal Bruner (Steve Cochran), "You're sick, Cal. You don't care about anyone or anything."

Another reason he appeared right at home in these films is that his co-star in all



Mr. Adam and Eve (1957-58)  
Ida Lupino and Howard Duff

PHOTOFEST

four pictures was Ida Lupino who became his bride in 1951. (Ida admitted, "I fell in love with his voice on the radio before I ever met him.") They also teamed up in the CBS-TV comedy series *Mr. Adams and Eve* in 1957 and 1958 as married and sometimes harried movie stars. Just as Tuttle's and Duff's affection for their parts on the Spade program shone though their performances, so on television husband and wife genuinely relished lampooning their images on both sides of the camera and taking swipes at the studio system as Eve Drake and Howard Adams.

Throughout the 1950s Duff appeared in a number of TV anthology series including *Ford Theatre*, *Climax*, *Schlitz Playhouse of Stars*, *Front Row Center*, *Science Fiction Theater*, *Crossroads*, and *Alcoa Theater*, and also put in an appearance as Mark Twain on *Bonanza*.

He began the following decade as star of *Dante* on NBC. For one season as Willie Dante, a suave nightclub owner with a mildly shady past, Duff traded quips with his bartender (Tom D'Andrea) and maitre d' (Alan Mowbray) and punches with as-

## KING OF SPADES

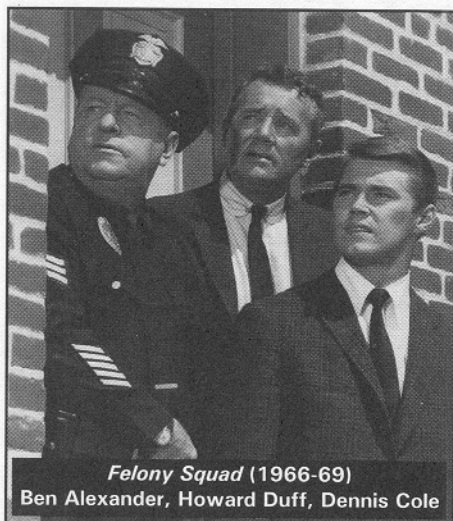
sorted scofflaws.

Although he appeared on almost every dramatic program of note during the 1960s including *I Spy*, *Burke's Law*, *Mr. Novak*, *Judd, for the Defense*, *Arrest and Trial*, *Twilight Zone*, *Combat*, and *The Alfred Hitchcock Hour*; his meatiest part came on *Felony Squad* (1966-69) as Sgt. Steve Stone who served as mentor to Detective Jim Briggs (Dennis Cole).

As they grey crept into his temples and seeds of jowls formed along his chinline, Duff moved smoothly from leading roles in which he supported the laws into guest shots where he bent or broke them. Whether appearing on *Mannix*, *The Streets of San Francisco*, *The Rockford Files*, *Shaft* or working with a longer leash on made-for-TV movies such as *Tight as a Drum*, *Snatched*, *The Heist*, or *A Little Game*, his characters were often on their way to dusty death or at least a prison cell.

When *Dallas* hit the jackpot in the late 1970s and Americans became fascinated with watching the unsavory rich dealing deceit at every hand, Duff knew they were singing his song: "Having a Grand Old Crime." As Sheriff Titus Semple on *Flamingo Road* he knew where all the bodies and secrets were buried. On *Knot's Landing* he played Paul Galveston who used his millions to manipulate for his purposes and to degrade for his amusement. As Senator Henry Harrison O'Dell on *Dallas* he had more power than money but no more scruples than the other wheeler-dealers he had played.

He continued to find steady employment on *Murder, She Wrote*, *Scarecrow and Mrs. King*, *Detective in the House*, *Magnum, P.I.*, and other crime shows almost to the end of his life as well as choice roles in acclaimed movies like *Kramer vs. Kramer* and *The Late Show*.



PHOTOFEST

Howard Duff died of a heart attack July 8, 1990 at the age of 76. In an action that proved the hard-boiled actor was really a soft-hearted person, Duff had been up late the night before his death at a telethon to raise funds for residents of Santa Barbara who had lost their homes in a recent fire.

Although Duff admitted that his early love was the stage and that he was fond of making motion pictures, he never lost his affection for radio. He first stepped before a microphone in the mid-thirties, could still be heard half a lifetime later on *Zero Hour* in 1973 and *The Sears Radio Theatre* in 1979 and 1980, and it is one role in radio that overshadowed all his other accomplishments as an actor.

If some student wants to write a paper about Duff's place in show business history, the words spoken weekly by announcer Dick Joy would be instructive: "And now, with Howard Duff as Spade, Wildroot brings to the air the greatest detective of them all in *The Adventures of Sam Spade*." Period. End of report. ■

*NOTE— Tune in to TWTD during June and July to hear Howard Duff as Sam Spade and in other radio radio roles.*