

GUNSMOKE

BY STEVE DARNALL

For most of the Golden Age of radio, the western was considered pretty much a juvenile domain. The stories were simple-- usually conflicts between obvious good guys and obvious bad guy-- and while some off the shows rated high with adults as well, their appeal lay more in the larger-than-life characters (e.g. the Lone Ranger, Hopalong Cassidy and the Cisco Kid) than in evoking any real sense of the West.

Then in 1952, a new Western rode into town. The saga of a Marshal trying to keep the peace in the otherwise untamed territory of Dodge City, Kansas, this show was *Gunsmoke*. By all rights, it shouldn't have had a chance, coming in towards the tail end of the Golden Age of Radio. Yet it lasted for nine years, changing our idea of what Westerns could do. It wouldn't be a great stretch to suggest it changed our ideas of what *radio* could do.

The saga of *Gunsmoke* actually began several years earlier, with the pairing of producer Norman Macdonnell and writer

Steve Darnall is a free-lance writer from Chicago. He would like to acknowledge Suzanne and Gabor Barabas' Gunsmoke: A Complete History, John Dunning's On The Air: The Encyclopedia of Old-Time Radio, and Leonard Maltin's The Great American Broadcast, all of which were invaluable in assembling this article.

John Meston. Macdonnell was responsible for several critically-celebrated (if often unsponsored) dramatic shows, chief among them the outstanding anthology shows *Escape* and *Romance*. (He also produced *The Adventures of Philip Marlowe*, a smart, violent detective series that starred actor Gerald Mohr.)

In 1950, Macdonnell began working with John Meston, a network censored-turned-writer who had grown bored with telling people what not to write and decided to try writing some stories of his own. One of them, "Wild Jack Rhett," was performed on *Escape*. This western drama starred actor John Dehner in the title role, and featured Parley Baer, Howard McNear and



Writer John Meston, left, with producer-director Norman Macdonnell

William Conrad.

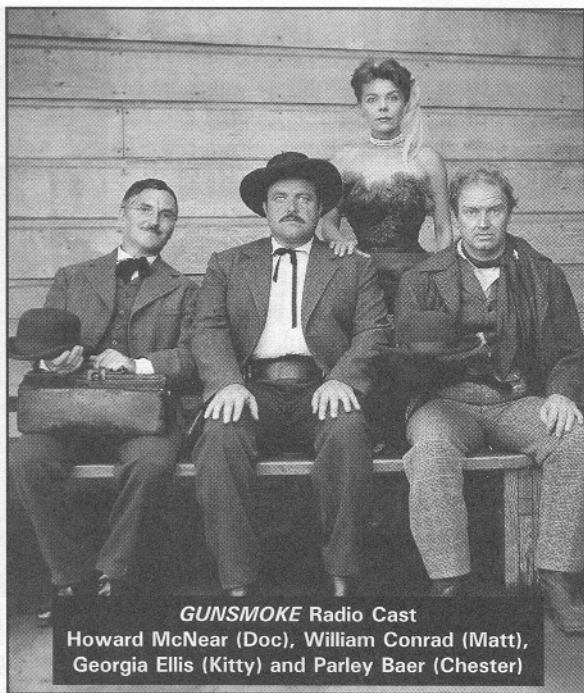
The show was satisfying enough to lead Macdonnell and Meston to contemplate a Western that would avoid the clichés of B-movies and aim for the adult audience that appreciated dramas like *Escape*.

With "Pagosa," which aired on *Romance* in 1951, it was obvious that Macdonnell and Meston had the concept for *Gunsmoke*, if not the framework, more or less in place. "Pagosa" starred William Conrad as Jeff Spain, a retired Marshal whose efforts to stake a land claim are thwarted until he agrees to don the badge again.

In keeping with the series' title, "Pagosa" featured Georgia Ellis as Jeff Spain's love interest. Around this same time, CBS was also contemplating an adult Western. Network President William S. Paley had been a fan of the *Philip Marlowe* series; when that show left the air for good in 1951, he suggested that the network try a drama along the lines of a "Philip Marlowe in the old West."

The network had actually flirted with the idea before; in 1949, two audition recordings had been made for a potential series called *Gunsmoke*. One starred Rye Billsbury (the last of the Mr. First Nighters) as Marshal Mark Dillon. The other starred Howard Culver (who had played *Straight Arrow*). The network passed on the idea, but kept the name handy-- just in case.

Then, in early 1952, a strange sort of providence happened. The CBS series *Operation Underground* was about to lose its sponsor-- and subsequently, its time slot. The network needed a replacement quickly. They had the *Gunsmoke* title and a willing producer in Macdonnell. All the producer



GUNSMOKE Radio Cast
Howard McNear (Doc), William Conrad (Matt),
Georgia Ellis (Kitty) and Parley Baer (Chester)

needed was a script, a star and some orchestrations.

He had a week to come up with all three.

Macdonnell and Meston (who had agreed to supervise the writing on *Gunsmoke*) got to work. First of all, something about the character's name-- Mark Dillon-- didn't seem right. Too contemporary, Meston thought; from now on, he would be Marshal *Matt* Dillon. Offering Meston's scripts for "Wild Jack Rhett" and "Pagosa" as examples, the duo gave radio writer Walter Brown Newman the task of writing the first episode. Freelance orchestrator Rex Koury composed a beautiful, majestic theme song under a tight deadline and scored it for an 18-piece orchestra.

Everyone concerned was determined that Matt Dillon would not be a stereotypical drawling cowboy. CBS, hoping for a star draw, suggested Raymond Burr for the role. Macdonnell and Meston, on the other hand, figured they could do just as well by

drawing from the rep company they had built up doing *Escape* and *Romance*, especially since they had already produced a prototype of *Gunsmoke* with "Pagosa." So it was that William Conrad-- who had turned up on radio more often than static-- was cast as the Marshal. Conrad had a marvelous, resonant voice, and you knew he meant every word he said when he laid down the law. As he put it, Dillon was "the first man [would-be troublemakers] look for and the last they want to meet," and you believed it. (Macdonnell *did* use Burr a few years later, on the short-lived series *Fort Laramie*.)

Those people who listened to the first *Gunsmoke* on April 26, 1952, might not have automatically assumed that this was the future of radio. For one thing, the story relied heavily on coincidence. In it, a young man who idolizes the Marshal's way with a gun turns out to be young William Bonney (a.k.a. Billy The Kid). Dillon's relationship with his deputy Chester (played by Parley Baer) and the town Doctor (Howard McNear) were not completely defined; in this initial episode, Doc is thrilled to have the business that results from Dodge City's gunplay-- so thrilled that Dillon threatens to deck him. One character who would become a staple of the show didn't appear at all.

All of that would change, through the work of Meston and the kibitzing of the cast. An off-handed ad-lib by Baer gave Chester the last name of Proudfoot. Conrad, meanwhile, suggested naming the macabre Doc after *New Yorker* cartoonist Charles Addams, whose work also displayed a ghoulish humor.

Baer and McNear were consummate radio actors, and both brought great depth to their characters. As Dillon's deputy, Chester was loyal to the end, if not always



William Conrad and Georgia Ellis

on-the-ball. He was susceptible to the lure of gambling, he drank his rye whiskey with sugar, he sometimes taxed Dillon's patience to the point where the Marshal would send him out for the mail just to get him out of the office for awhile. But he knew how to handle a gun and he understood that Dillon was in charge.

Doc, meanwhile, could be something of a rogue. John Meston described him as "somebody who didn't know too much medicine... but he was not a cynic." Indeed, he was livid when he encountered a bogus "medicine man" (as he did in the 1953 story "Professor Lute Bone"). At the same time, he wouldn't necessarily think twice about rooking a greenhorn in a card game, he couldn't always save his patients, and there were even times when he'd become a thorn in Matt's side just for something to do. In the 1956 story "Romeo," Matt has his hands full when the children of two rival cattlemen fall in love. Doc's contribution is to make matters worse by goading the two young lovers into running away and getting married. At the same time, he had a knack for knowing when

people were in trouble; beaten wives and past-their-prime gunslingers alike shared their secrets with Doc.

A few episodes in the run, Georgia Ellis joined the cast full-time as Kitty Russell.

Radio had rarely, if ever, seen the likes of Miss Kitty before. Ostensibly, she was a saloon girl who worked her way to become owner of the Long Branch Saloon. Meston, however, was cognizant of the realities of women trying to make a living in the old West. It was never stated outright on the show, but it was implied that Kitty made most of her money by engaging in the world's oldest profession.

Dillon and Kitty never really had what we would call a "romantic relationship," but there were no two people closer in all of Dodge. She was a woman trying to survive in an era where women generally depended on men; he was the lone voice of the law in an otherwise untamed territory. (As Dillon put it at the start of each episode: "It's a chancy job, and it makes a man watchful... and a little lonely.")

Matt and Kitty never actually professed love for one another, but they had a real bond. Ellis' voice had a wonderful, world-weary quality that was perfect for a character that implicitly had a past best left behind.

Their relationship is defined fairly early on in the show's run, in the 1952 episode "Kitty" (written by Georgia Ellis' then-husband Antony Ellis). Dillon invites

Kitty to a dance. She declines; although she doesn't say as much, she knows from experience what "upstanding citizens" think of saloon girls.

Finally, Kitty agrees to go, and the townspeople turn out to be just as antisocial as Kitty predicted. (Although they tell the Marshal that *he's* welcome to stay.) After being told her quite plainly that her presence isn't desired, Kitty is practically in tears and Dillon, furious with the "hypocritical prayer spouters," removes his badge and invites the insulting parties to back up their remarks. In the end, the two return to town, where they, Chester and Doc have a party of their own.

Such bittersweet stories were rare for radio drama, let alone Western radio drama, but they featured prominently on *Gunsmoke*. Under Meston's editorial supervision, Matt Dillon not only didn't wear a white hat, there were some occasions when he didn't even get the bad guys.

Meston's 1954 story "The F.U." took this "fallible hero" idea to its extreme. The story begins with a shooting, and Al Clovis is suspected. When he rides out of town, Matt



and Chester assume he's guilty and dutifully follow him. Too late they realize that Clovis was a decoy, designed to lure the law out of town so that his gang could rob the bank. Things go from bad to worse later when the gang gets the drop on Chester, forcing Dillon to surrender his gun and his horses in exchange for his deputy. As the two lawmen start their long walk back to Dodge-- their quarry well out of reach-- a thunderstorm begins.

To say that this wouldn't happen to the Lone Ranger is putting it mildly. Meston and his staff of writers did a marvelous job of subverting Western clichés (Meston once wrote that his disdain for the typical screen cowboy was such that "I spit in his milk, and he'll have to go elsewhere to find somebody to pour the lead for his golden bullets"). Actor John Dehner recalled that the cast wasn't above bringing in their own reference material if they thought Meston was fudging details.

As a result of such devotion, the writers showed their audience that the settlers on the new frontier knew that defeat, sorrow and brutality went hand in hand with justice, humor and hope.

The desire to stake out new territory on *Gunsmoke* wasn't limited to the writers. The sound effects team of Tom Hanley, Bill James and Ray Kemper heightened the sense of realism with some revolutionary technical achievements.

Macdonnell realized that the deliberate pacing of Western drama-- coupled with the fact that the characters were often in unchartered territory-- meant that sound and sound-effects were as important as dialogue. Hanley, James and Kemper rose to the task with an uncanny attention to detail. When Matt left his desk for a cup of coffee, the soundmen made sure he took the same number of steps each way.

The *Gunsmoke* team even managed to make gunshots sound realistic. Prior to this, most sound effects men had simply shot blank cartridges near a microphone. This was passable (if a little generic) but because of the engineering at CBS, they were never as loud over the air as real gunshots.

Kemper and Hanley side-stepped the problem with the help of a brand-new technology: recording tape. The duo visited William Conrad's house (Kemper described it to Leonard Maltin as being "almost a natural amphitheater") and recorded a number of different gunshots. Then, when it came time for the broadcast, they used the tape machine to bypass the speaker and the engineering "limiters." The result was nothing short of revelatory; as Norm Macdonnell enthused later, gunshots finally sounded like gunshots.

Such devotion was the rule, rather than the exception, when it came to *Gunsmoke*. The players (both the leads and their support), the director, the crew, the musicians all enjoyed a healthy camaraderie and from all reports, enjoyed each other's company immensely.

With an almost unrivaled combination of professionalism and camaraderie (even for radio), it's no wonder that *Gunsmoke* became an almost immediate hit, at one point airing twice a week over CBS. Within a year, the show was sponsored by, of all things, Post Cereals (perhaps the Post people thought they were getting another *Tennessee Jed*); when they stepped aside, Chesterfield and L & M Cigarettes were waiting in the wings; they stayed with the show until 1957.

Given its success, it wasn't long before CBS contemplated taking *Gunsmoke* to television. The immediate question of casting reared its head: many radio shows that moved to television (e.g. *Burns & Allen*, *Our Miss Brooks*) did so with their original cast. In fact, the radio cast of *Gunsmoke*



GUNSMOKE TV Cast: James Arness (Matt), Ken Curtis (Chester), Milburn Stone (Doc), Amanda Blake (Kitty)

was allowed to "audition" for the television show (donning period costumes for a photo shoot at Knott's Berry Farm), but there is debate as to whether this was a serious audition or simply an attempt to placate the actors. (Certainly anyone who imagined Conrad as anything other than a portly fellow with a marvelous voice would have been in for a surprise.) Whatever the reason, when *Gunsmoke* debuted on television in 1955, James Arness, Amanda Blake, Dennis Weaver and Milburn Stone were Matt, Kitty, Chester and Doc.

Then as now, the debate rages among *Gunsmoke* fans as to which version was superior. Macdonnell always saw them as two separate entities-- even though the television show relied heavily on the radio show's scripts-- and that's probably the best way to look at it. (Actor Harry Bartell, who appeared on both versions of *Gunsmoke*, dismissed the television show as "the Hollywood version of the adult western.")

If *Gunsmoke* wasn't as innovative on television as it was on radio, it still managed to survive for a remarkable twenty seasons-- a feat that precious few shows in any medium accomplished. (It also featured a number of scripts written by a

young Sam Peckinpah, who took *Gunsmoke's* realism a step further a decade later when he made *The Wild Bunch*.)

After *Gunsmoke* took off, a number of radio westerns-- good ones-- came and went. There was Macdonnell's 1956 series *Fort Laramie*, James Stewart's 1953 series *The Six Shooter*, *Luke Slaughter of Tombstone*, even a radio version of *Have Gun Will Travel* (starring *Gunsmoke* veteran John

Dehner).

When the wagons were gone and the smoke cleared, *Gunsmoke* was the only one left standing. In fact, it was the last of the west coast network dramas (*Suspense* and *Yours Truly*, *Johnny Dollar* having moved to New York) when it was cancelled on June 18, 1961. Apparently, no one in the cast had any idea at the time of the show's demise; had they known, Parley Baer suggested, "it would have been terribly depressing."

Its tempting to say that *Gunsmoke* is gone but not forgotten, but that's something of a cliché, and *Gunsmoke* hated clichés. Instead, let's say that *Gunsmoke* was that rarest of breeds; a show that managed to both innovate and entertain, a show that was as much fun to make as it was to hear, a show whose best moments carry as much dramatic weight now as they did forty years ago.

It was a special show in a special time. We will not see the likes of it riding through town again anytime soon. ■

NOTE-- Tune in TWTD September 25 to hear the two Gunsmoke audition shows and a 1952 broadcast from the series.