

WHAAAAT A CHAAAAARACTER!

Walter Tetley — Radio's Eternal Adolescent

BY ELIZABETH MC LEOD

Whether you think of him as Leroy, the all-American-kid nephew of the Great Gildersleeve, or as Julius, the sinister delivery boy who gleefully tormented Phil Harris and Remley, chances are you know the work of Walter Tetley. For more than twenty-five years he played kid roles on radio — but many old time radio fans don't realize he had an extensive career on the stage before he ever saw a microphone. While still a child — or at least while **PASSING** as a child — he was an international star in vaudeville.

Tetley's early life is something of a mystery. Publicity articles published during his radio career offered several birth dates — 1920, 1921, and 1923 were all used at one time or another. The Social Security Administration's files, however, state that Tetley was con-

siderably older — citing a birth date of 1915.

The explanation is most likely a simple one: Tetley's parents were trying to prolong their son's viability as a child performer by fudging his age. His small size and ever-boyish voice helped keep that career going for far longer than his parents could have ever hoped...with a little help from radio.

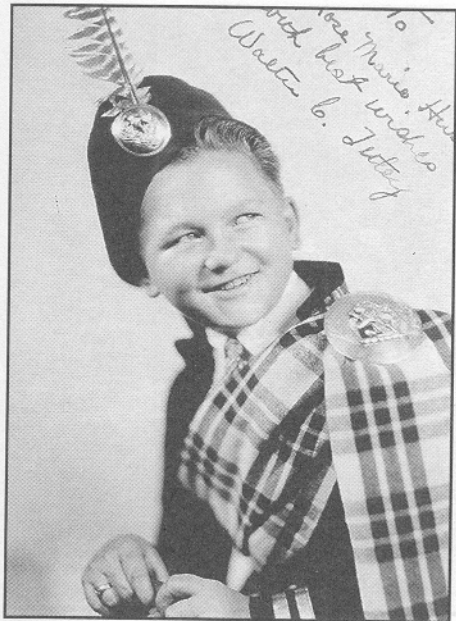
Tetley began his career as a child performer in vaudeville in the 1920s, doing a precise imitation of Sir Harry Lauder — complete with kilts, tam, and knobbly walking stick. Lauder himself saw the act in 1930, and was favorably impressed. From that point on, Tetley was billed as "Wee Sir Harry." In 1934, Tetley traveled to Europe, where he performed to considerable acclaim on



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His big break on radio came in 1935 when he joined Fred Allen's *Town Hall Tonight* as one of the Mighty Allen Art Players. It was here that his talent as a mimic and dialectician really came to the attention of radio producers. His smart-alec vocal style meshed perfectly with Allen's sour-apple approach to comedy, and Tetley was a valued member of the Players thru the end of 1937. It was with Allen's troupe that he honed his skill at playing brats and wisecracs, often in a knife-edged accent which revealed his New Jersey roots.

In 1938, Tetley and his mother moved to California, where the diminutive actor quickly found small roles in a number of films. Tetley's movie career was not extensive, however — limited mostly to bit parts as messengers, bellhops, and office boys. Radio would remain his primary oc-

Lauder's home turf — the music halls of Britain.

He made his radio debut in late 1930, often appearing on WJZ's *Children's Hour* with his Scotch characterization. He remained with this series, later known as *Coast To Coast On A Bus* for more than seven years. He also appeared as a featured performer in *The Lady Next Door*, an NBC late-afternoon serial of 1931-32, as well as on Raymond Knight's pioneering comedy series *The Cuckoo Hour* and various other NBC programs.

Radio Guide's February 4, 1932 issue features an article entitled "Babes In Radioland," in which Tetley is one of several child actors profiled. An accompanying photo shows Tetley looking like a child of about eleven, dressed in his Scotch costume.



"THE GREAT GILDERSLEEVE"

PHOTOFEST

Walter Tetley, Harold Perry, Mary Lee Robb

cupation for the next two decades.

During the 1940s Tetley rarely had a chance to display his dialect skills. The Scotch routine was abandoned as the actor became typecast as a wise-guy kid — with Leroy (*The Great Gildersleeve*) and Julius (*Phil Harris - Alice Faye Show*) the best examples. Tetley's skill as an actor is quite apparent when his two major roles are compared.

Although the voices of Leroy and Julius were quite similar, the two characters are very different. Leroy was simply a pre-adolescent boy, with a boy's problems and a boy's point of view. Although he could be fresh with his elders, he was never a Bad Boy. Listening to Leroy, the portrayal is so sincere, and so convincing, that one completely loses sight of the fact that the character is being portrayed by a man in his thirties.

Julius, on the other hand, was an utterly unreal character — a cartoon — a veritable fiend in human shape. His greatest joy in life was finding new ways to torment Phil and Frankie — and his side remarks to Alice tended to reveal a more-than-adolescent appreciation for the pleasures of the flesh. In Julius, Tetley gave voice to one of the most memorable kids of radio — and certainly the most "adult!"

In addition to these two well-remembered roles, Tetley appeared on other programs from time to time during the 1940s, and had a leading role as well in a 1945-vintage syndicated transcription show, *The Anderson Family*. He almost got his own starring series in 1948, when he



ALICE FAYE and WALTER TETLEY

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"THE GREAT GILDERSLEEVE"

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Walter Tetley, Willard Waterman, Mary Lee Robb

recorded an audition for NBC. Entitled *The Kid On The Corner*, the proposed series featured Tetley as a wise-guy newsboy who got into various scrapes around his neighborhood. Harry Von Zell was featured as the stuffy straight-man. The show was not picked up, however, and Tetley remained in supporting roles for the rest of his radio career.

After radio faded out, Tetley turned to animation voice work, and was featured in many cartoon series of the early 1960s, most notably as "Sherman," boy companion of canine genius "Mr. Peabody." He continued to do voice work until his death from cancer on September 4, 1975.

Little did his parents realize when they fudged his birthdate that their son would



"WHO DONE IT?" (1942)

Walter Tetley, Lou Costello, Bud Abbott

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"HOW DOOOO YOU DO" (1946)

Bert Gordon (The Mad Russian), Harry Von Zell, Walter Tetley

go on to have one of the longest "childhoods" on record.

And we are much the richer for it. ■

NOTE-- Tune in TWTD November 7 for a four-hour salute to Walter Tetley.