

GATHER 'ROUND THE RADIO
E-NEWSLETTER FOR THE METROPOLITAN
WASHINGTON OLD-TIME RADIO CLUB
THE GRTR STUDIO EDITION



THE SIGNATURE MOMENTS ISSUE
JANUARY 19, 2019

THE SET-UP

Hello fine listeners, and welcome once again to the mythical confines of the GRTR Studio where we broadcast information and inspiration about radio, music, nostalgia, personality, books, and beyond. Terry Gross continues to be our inspiration. Listen to her “Fresh Air” radio show, live or podcast; check your NPR listings for a station where you can tune in.

Out the window we see a pale western sun through craggy branches, and here in the Mud Room the table is strewn with audio tapes and pages of typescript; such is the archives of the Gather 'Round The Radio. Chuck and Joanie and I are choosing clips and quotes to air in celebration of our beginning the fifteenth year of this little e-newsletter. January 2005 was the first, sent via email in

haphazard Word format. Artie Shaw had just passed away, and Jerry Orbach, too. On those somber notes we sent out the call for Clubbers to send us their own profiles done up in style for a sunshine letter. Over the years we announced Club programs and other events around town. We were privileged to become part of the Mailman sending-list; and finally, it dawned upon us to convert to the PDF format. I signed a lease on the tinpot studio down by the creek. Chuck brought in his sound equipment, and we had a chance to play music; Joanie negotiated network feed and a sponsor for us, and there you have it: transcripts by email and the broadcast you are listening to now.

ON THE AIR

Joanie eyes the clock as we finish up our coffee and cornbread and head down the hall. Chuck is piping in a lovely song that we played not too long ago, on our broadcast from January 2018. It's a Sergio Mendes blend of Brazilian folk and jazz, "So Many Stars," circa 1987, sung in this version by the incomparable Sarah Vaughan.

Hello everyone and welcome to the broadcast! We're glad you will be along for our stroll down memory lane. We will read excerpts from essays sent in and play audio tapes of interviews of folks who traveled from hither and yon to visit us here in the studio. They all liked the creek out back.

A mainstay in our Club activities has always been script re-creations. Often, we would read an OTR script at meetings; Chuck devised an evening of short scripts where we would fashion dialogue and plot to a pre-timed tape of sound effects. Original scripts were produced and soon the Club found themselves taking to the road to perform. There was great interest coast-to-coast of groups performing scripts, a mini-boom of interest in scripts readings with all the trappings of costumes, microphones, an SFX table, the true studio feel. With the GRTR we advertised such happenings in places as diverse as Gaithersburg Maryland, Vienna and Richmond Virginia, and an old-time marquee theater in downtown Lynchburg Virginia.

The Club was right in-step with script presentations and they took to the road, performing in such venues as GWU's Lisner Auditorium, the Library of Congress on Capitol Hill, and the Packard Auditorium at the Library Archives in Culpeper Virginia. They were met with great acclaim; and cast-members wrote them up for both *Radio Recall* and the GRTR.

Here is a report about the Club performance at the auditorium in Culpeper. Rob Farr wrote it up, and Joanie will step up and read Rob's essay, from the GRTR of May 24, 2016:

The Club's Road Show Troupe scored another triumph with an encore performance of full-tilt script presentations at the Packard Theater in the Library of Congress facility in Culpeper Virginia on April 16th... It proves once again the treasures that can be found in small town Virginia. Over the years, the Metropolitan Old-Time Radio Club has performed live, Golden Age radio recreations for audiences as varied as senior citizens to seasoned attendees of OTR conventions. But perhaps no venue has been so high-profile as the Library of Congress Packard Theater in Culpeper Virginia. Culpeper is the site of the National Audio-Visual Conservation Center, where the nation's visual and sound heritage is archived in former civil defense vaults built deep into Pony Mountain.

Led by long-time member Michael Hayde, on April 16 the club made its second appearance at the Packard Theater, the previous outing occurring in 2015 with recreations of *Dragnet* and *My Favorite Husband*. Last month's performance was the first time the program was augmented with live organ accompaniment provided by Ben Model, who usually accompanies silent films at the New York's Museum of Modern Art, McLean's Alden Theater and the Library of Congress. The organ at the Packard is a rich and flexible instrument capable of sound effects from church bells to train whistles.

The sold-out house witnessed live performances of *John's Other Wife* (soap opera), *Little Orphan Annie* (juvenile adventure) and *Pat Novak for Hire* (crime drama). The bill of fare was chosen to introduce a selection of genres to an audience unfamiliar with old-time radio. Even attendees who occasionally listen to WAMU's *Big Broadcast* were treated to an authentic demonstration of how Golden-Age radio broadcasts actually worked, complete with director's cues, cast members deftly shuttling back-and-forth before microphones, and sound effects created with tools such as coconut shells, aluminum sheets and rain sticks. For those effects that could not be reproduced on stage, pre-recorded sound was used; yet even this was authentic to the era as practical effects were often augmented by sounds played back from disc or, by the 1950's, tape.

Each program had its own unique set of sound patterns, requiring a crew of five ably led by Mark and Marsha Bush. The ensemble cast, many of whom have been performing in club recreations for years, delighted the audience with costumes appropriate to their characters. For example, actress Wendy Wilmer had three costume changes as she transformed from a 5-year-old girl to Little Orphan Annie to a sultry *femme fatale*! During the costume changes, Ben Model serenaded the audience with music that might have been heard by a studio audience of the era. The audience was also treated to a talk by the curator of the sound division about the Library's extensive collection of wire recordings and transcription discs.

As an added bonus, a secret message was included in the program along with a photograph of Little Orphan Annie's 1936 decoder badge and a pencil. Several in the cast later remarked how amazing it was to see 200 modern-day audience members assiduously writing down their numbers to decode Annie's four-word message.

For members of the MWOTRC who couldn't make it to Culpeper, plans are afoot to perform the same slate of programs before a Washington audience in the Jefferson building of the Library of Congress. Stay tuned for more information!

VISITS TO THE STUDIO

Thanks, Joanie, nice reading, excellent. Now we can turn to essays of recollection that Club members sent in, and then Chuck will cue up some audio clips of members who were here in the studio talking with us. In all, since 2013, nine people have been featured in the GRTR studio edition.

Cort Vitty sent his essay to us in the dusty courier pouch; Sandy Pitts-Malone spoke with us over ship-to-shore radio, and Walden Hughes spoke with us via trans-continental telephone hookup. Folks who found their way along the river and spent the afternoon with us are as follows: Jim Widner, Sally Stephens, Bert Rude, Denis Roma, Karen Lee, and Jack French.

In April 2014, Sandy Malone recalled her childhood and told us about listening to shows on Armed Forces Radio when her family was stationed in Spain. She topped off our conversation with this quote remembering Ed Walker:

When Ed Walker took over WAMU's "The Big Broadcast", I recognized him immediately from my years in the D.C. area back in the 1950's when he was one of the JOY BOYS OF RADIO who told us that they: "...chase the electrons to and fro...."

During his visit to the studio in 2014, Denis Roma told us about his findings in new-time radio. In his interview, he mentioned original scripts available on podcast, in particular a Canadian group called the Decoder Ring Theater which produces scripts featuring a masked crimefighter who battles evil in the city of Toronto in the 1930's/1940's. Another favorite that Denis found is 'Welcome to Night Vale', which he tells us can best be described as 'Prairie Home Companion' meets 'Twilight Zone'. So, you can see how we here at GRTR will always advocate seeking out these new-time broadcasts which always pay homage to the shows that went before.

MUSIC BRIDGE AND COMMERCIAL



Joanie is tapping her pencil on her clipboard. Chuck is piping in a bit of nostalgia, heard right on these airwaves a few weeks ago, Rosemary Clooney and the Benny Goodman Sextet, Cole Porter's "It's Bad for Me," 1955.

Our sponsor these past years is the Dayton Dragons Baseball Team. News these days has reached us that a great player for the Dragons has been traded to the Los Angeles Dodgers. He's an infielder names Jeter Downs; we talked about him last summer and it is quite an accomplishment for a player to make the leap from Class A Developmental League to the Major Leagues. Jeter has great skill; he thrilled the fans at Fifth Third Park. We wish the youthful Jeter Downs good luck with his career.

THE BIG CONSOLE RADIOS

In 2016 Bert Rude visited us from the hill country of Maryland and in an extensive interview he told us about his childhood days of radio fascination:

My grandmother over in South Dakota had a beautiful cathedral-style radio in her front parlor. I began fiddling with the dials and knobs and it wasn't long before I found out that I was receiving short-wave! My QSL cards came in from London, Moscow, Prague, and Havana, you know, really colorful, like medallions. It was the Cold War years and I wondered if I was on some surveillance list or other. Most likely not, I imagine, but I do remember that I used to get up in the morning to the sounds of "Waltzing Matilda" being played over Radio Australia.

In 2017 Karen Lee crossed two rivers and made her way down the lane, telling us how much she liked the creek. It was a fun time talking with her about New York and the world beyond. She recounted her imaginative take on early radio:

GRTR: Thanks for the notes you sent! Let's take a cue first from your childhood and the way you remember the big wooden console radio that brought you so much pleasure.

KAREN LEE: Oh, yes, I loved everything about that radio, the dials for FM, AM, and SW; and the hum and the static when I first turned it on. I imagined it was a spaceship console and that there might be encrypted messages from outer space. I would turn the knobs and listen to anything that came on.

GRTR: What sort of programs did you find?

KAREN LEE: Actually, the first voice I remember announced, "This is the BBC World Service." The news from overseas fascinated me, and I would locate the countries on my globe.

GRTR: That would be fun. I wonder if that sort of early world-wide listening helped inspire you towards your career as an anthropologist?

KAREN LEE: Well yes, I think so, but television also, you know, those TV travelogues? And I guess from listening to old-time radio programs. You recognize “Chandu the Magician”? That was a favorite, a really neat show. I was completely captivated.

GRTR: I never heard it, but I read about it in my John Dunning encyclopedia. He gave it a good write-up, “one of a kind,” he wrote, with the exotic locales like Egypt, and the mysticism. He even spelled out that distinctive signature that opened the show, after a gong sounded.

KAREN LEE: So, you know it?

GRTR: I saw it written in the Dunning. Let’s give it a go, OK?

GRTR and KAREN LEE (*in unison*): “*CHANNNDOOOO....the Magician!*”

KAREN LEE: All we needed was the gong!



MUSICAL GUEST IN STUDIO MAY 2014

It’s a fine day and a full house in the Studio. I’m rustling my papers, Joanie is fine tuning the board, and Chuck is immersed in conversation with our musical guest, Colin Meloy, who has come to visit while touring with his band The Decemberists. Colin has always liked the R.E.M.

songbook. Now he steps up and sings the captivating “You Are the Everything,” by Peter Buck, brilliant mandolinist and legendary front man for R.E.M. It’s a coaxing song for a child who wants to step into the world, to feel secure, and perhaps then his creative spirit can find a path.

RESEARCH TAKES A FRONT ROW SEAT

Here, I’ll read an article I wrote about a panel discussion at the Cincinnati OTR Convention 2008. It appeared in *Radio Recall* June 2008.

The Author’s Panel on Friday afternoon was wonderful, and well-attended. Derek Tague was the moderator, and the six authors with him were an astute group, indeed. The authors were: Francis M. (Mike) Nevins; Jim Cox; Martin Grams Jr.; Jack French; Michael Banks; and John Rayburn. With Derek’s excellent leading questions, these gentlemen entertained us with stories about research trips and curious interviews; about persistence and the sheer good fortune that are part of the fabric of writing.

There was no disguising the fact that writing about the entertainment business and the electronics industry is hard work. Thank goodness for publishers who bring this work to light. McFarland Publishing out of North Carolina, and Bear Mountain Media in Georgia are champions in this field.

“Talk to people, and get leads,” intoned Michael Banks. That’s how he found out that papers relating to his subject, (the Crosley company) were housed in Sarasota Florida. And off he went.

Jack French, from Virginia, spent many an afternoon in a library in Thousand Oaks California, which was the repository for the “Candy Matson” scripts, essential to researching his book Private Eyelashes.

Mike Nevins researched cheese-making at a factory in Wisconsin, for a mystery novel; and interviewed a fellow in Arizona for his book on “The Cisco Kid.”

Martin Grams got nods of recognition when he said, “Be prepared to photocopy!” If the library won’t allow it, be prepared to take good notes. Hire a good research assistant, and above all, keep the inspiration. That’s the life of these writers; and the monetary return, all agree, is small. Our field of interest, though, is filled with avid readers who will seek out a well-researched subject, and these gentlemen gave us a wonderfully articulate look at the process.

A CONVERGENCE OF RESEARCHERS

Chuck will now take his turn here and read this piece about the cooperation of researchers. He emerges from the sound booth, script in hand, and steps to the microphone. From the GRTR March 17, 2017:

A while back, our *Radio Recall* editor Jack French coordinated a series of messages between a researcher named Amanda and Club member Michael Hayde, a prolific author who had unearthed extensive material about the person of Amanda's interest: Robert Maxwell. The thread revealed as well that Jack had printed an excerpt from Amanda's 2008 PhD dissertation, (in *Radio Recall* February 2014 p.10), which coordinated nicely with Michael's contribution: his August 2009 *Radio Recall* article, "Criminal Casebook," (lead story, p. 1); and his book about the Superman phenomenon, *Flights of Fantasy: The Unauthorized But True Story of Radio and TV's Adventures of Superman* (Bear Manor Media 2009).

Amanda's thesis was insightful. She was researching children's radio programs of the 1930s, detailing the distinctions between the themes of shows aimed at the boys' audience, and those for a girl's audience.

Chuck continues to read what Amanda wrote:

"Over the course of the 1930s (radio) advertising stemmed from the predominately male ad agency professionals' preference for the boy consumer, whom they considered more predictable than girls. Furthermore, advertising professionals and broadcasters believed both that boy listeners favored adult male heroes, and that listening to storytelling and music programs would diminish boys' masculinity. Girls, advertisers assumed, were more flexible in their program choices and would still listen to programs with male heroes. These assumptions had important ramifications for girl listeners, whose favorite music and story programs were cancelled (in) the 1930s due to a lack of sponsors."

And thus, did Amanda study the brutal world of commercial radio; and Michael put Robert Maxwell right in the midst of it.

Maxwell had made *Superman* into “the hottest thing on Mutual...” writes Michael. A further quote from his article is this, from a critic who capsulizes the plight of the radio industry: “...which has been shouting its anxious intention to enlighten, instruct, and serve...”. *Superman* scripts began treating “real-life perils,” (prejudice and juvenile delinquency for example); and Maxwell was further involved in producing two shows geared towards crime prevention, which presented interviews with real convicts: their dreams, misfortunes, and their remorse. Michael tells us that, “despite plaudits,” *I Was a Convict* was cancelled after a short run. *Criminal Casebook* was next, with the goal of benefitting society, and with good scripts, but “Again, critical praise was not enough,” writes Michael, adding that “ad agencies and manufacturing concerns” rebuffed requests for sponsorship, relegating the show to being “lost in the ratings shuffle.”

So, Amanda’s shows for the girls’ audience, and the crime prevention shows, lost out in the competitive world of broadcasting. Stories and music on the one hand, and criminal psychology on the other, were excellent efforts, it seems. Michael’s phrase puts both in perspective: “...making a little radio history.” Jack French was surely pleased as well that he could make us aware of a “charming small world instance” of researchers sharing information.

MANC AND MARTIN GRAMS EARN THEIR PLACE

Martin Grams is now the editor of *Radio Recall* and has for years coordinated the Mid-Atlantic Nostalgia Convention every fall in Hunt Valley Maryland. Jack French has written a nice article about his presentation, featuring a lady who went by the name of “Ora.” Joanie is stepping up to the microphone to read Jack’s astute and surprising article, from the GRTR September 8, 2016.

In 1934, she was considered “the most influential woman in radio”. Guess who? She was born Aurore Dolores Daigle in Massachusetts but since few could pronounce her first name, she took the nickname “Ora.” She eventually married a widower with three children and acquired the

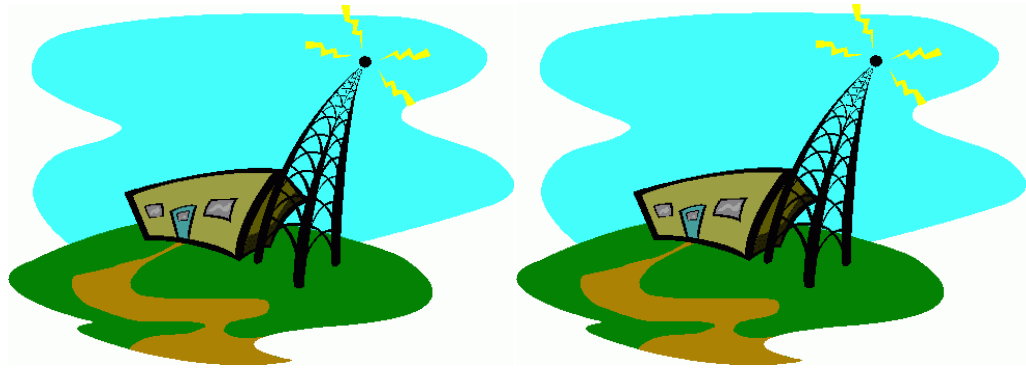
married name “Nichols.” So, who was Ora Nichols, why was she so influential in radio, and why in the heck does virtually nobody in our OTR hobby today know who she was?

Ora started her working career as a bookkeeper who also played the piano. When she married Arthur Nichols in 1920, the two tried to make a living in vaudeville with her at the piano and him playing violin. They had modest success until the silent movies crushed vaudeville. They next took employment playing music for the silent movies. This job was expanded to also doing the sound effects for the films, including hoof beats, crashes, weather changes, animal sounds, etc. They created some of their own devices for producing these sounds and were doing very well until “The Jazz Singer” debuted in 1927. With the birth of movies “that talked”, the folks who provide the music and sounds for the silent films were soon looking for other employment.

By 1928 Ora and Arthur had found some free-lance work for CBS and NBC doing sound effects for radio. Within a few years, they were put on staff payroll at CBS and were doing sound effects for their network shows. Thus, Ora became the first, and only, head of sound effects for a radio network. She trained their assistants at the sound table, usually employing drummers who were familiar with percussion instruments. When Arthur died a few years later, Ora continued to do sound effects, create new instruments of sound, and was personally responsible for creating the extensive sound effects studio at CBS.

She was on the team that provided sound effects for “War of the Worlds” under Orson Welles, an erratic and demanding director. She led the sound effects on “Buck Rogers of the 25th Century” and invented the sound of his space ship. With a few others, she did the sound effects on “March of Time” from 1931 to 1945. In 1934, she married a drummer, Louis Dorough but he died in 1943. Ora retired from radio in 1945, probably convinced that she had proven that women could, and should, be hired as sound effects personnel in radio broadcasting. Of course, in the Golden Age of Radio, women were almost never considered for announcers, station managers, engineers, sound effects personnel, etc. so her hopes never materialized. She died in 1951 at the age of 58 after a

long illness. Jack French will discuss Ora Nichols in his presentation on the history of radio sound effects at Mid-Atlantic Nostalgia Convention.



MUSIC BRIDGE AND NETWORK FEED

Joanie is giving us the cue to network feed, so we hasten to say good-bye and sign-off. We hope that you have enjoyed this Bonanza issue of GRTR; there was so much to cover! Send us more items, 14 years complete, starting out on 15.

Here is a wonderful singer, new to me, but fairly established in the realm of song as a successor to Rosemary Clooney. Her name is Stacey Kent and she is well-informed and comfortable with jazz-style orchestra or ensemble. Her 2017 album is entitled *"I Know a Dream: The Orchestral Sessions."* She has teamed up with Jim Tomlinson, instrumentalist and arranger, and the result is wonderful: time-honored favorites by Jobim, Gainsborough, and Ishiguro; and she knows enough to include a song from the Great American Songbook: Bob Haymes / Alan Brandt: "That's All."

"I can only give you country walks in Springtime..."

Soup and sandwiches in the Mud Room? But of course!

Thanks ever,

Mark A.

Langhorne PA