

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



THE WANDERIN' SKY ISSUE
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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.

The cold snap is in, wind swirling up and down the valley. The clipper came barreling east and there were touches of frost. The GRTR Studio team is stoking up the boiler and Fred is coaxing the old sound board through its squawks and hums. He's piping in a prayerful ensemble piece: "Gabriel's Oboe," by Ennio Morricone (from *The Mission*). Here, Lucia Micarelli's violin carries the melody, coaxed along by low strings. The album is her 2017 recital. Fred fades on the applause.

I'm done with my tea and toast; lots of messages in the dusty courier pouch. Beverly is watching the sweep of the clock towards network feed.

ON THE AIR

Hello everyone, and welcome to the broadcast. Today's a good mix of remembrance and reasons to be joyful. We'll look at a show where Georgia Ellis tackles a decidedly different role, in a fateful story by Katherine Anne Porter. Jack French spins a tale centered around the classic ballad, "Blue Moon": he remembers his high school prom and a headline-grabbing night at the movies for a bad guy. And I must encourage you to tune in to the NPR podcast *Radio Diaries*, especially an episode about 1920s New York, called "When Ground Zero Was Radio Row."

FOND MEMORIES OF SEDGWICK MOSS, 1932-2021

The sad news of Sedge's passing has circulated around the Club. Several folks wrote memories of the smiling and helpful fellow who had vintage LPs of big band music, and a train set in his house. Word has it as well that he was a neighborhood favorite in Arlington where he was the Caboose Park Ranger, greeting bike riders and walkers at the old caboose in Bluemont Park. Sandra Pitts-Malone sent in this lovely remembrance.

From her home down the valley, Beverly will step to the microphone and read Sandi's tribute.

It was that smile, that welcoming warmth, to a total stranger that beckoned me to join the MWOTRC in that church that night soon after my husband died. Sedge Moss walked toward me with a confident manner of one welcoming a longtime friend. He greeted me, asked me my name, and described the Club's fascinating interest in Old Time Radio.

His well-chosen words and his enthusiasm often kept me involved in lengthy conversations, others there would make sure to say "hi" to Sedge and welcome me to that night's gathering.

The following meetings continued to show Sedge's natural welcoming nature and warmth. He would ask how people were doing but never dwelled on his own health issues or those of his wife. He always answered questions including which Lutheran church he thought I should visit. He obviously had all the answers, or he'd find them and get back to you. Although Sedge had been staying home the last years, his presence

was always felt in the monthly meetings and luncheons. You could hear his voice welcoming you, with a smile and a touch of a joke. How I will miss him! But I am grateful for the times I did see and chat with him. What a guy!!



MUSIC BRIDGE AND COMMERCIAL

Lucia Micarelli is so wide-ranging in her recital choices! Here's another piece from that album: "Kashmir," and the listed composers (Plant, Page, and Bonham) are otherwise known as those old-time arena rockers, Led Zeppelin. Micarelli and her ensemble mates give them a deserving classical arrangement, keeping the insistent low string intro. And soon the pace quickens towards a joyful, if exhausting, melody. Fred fades on the thankful applause.

Our sponsor, the Dayton Dragons, have assured us that we shall remain in their fold; however they are still reluctant to allow the GRTR Studio to broadcast their games to our small but appreciative audience. The Dragons finished the season in 4th place in the 12-team High Level A minor league. The youngsters rode a 6-game win streak to finish the season.

The team continues to spotlight the greater Dayton community. Late in the season they helped the area Food Bank raise \$17,000 toward the cause. And they continue to provide elementary school teachers incentive awards to give to students who are showing satisfactory progress in their studies.

JACK FRENCH'S MUSICAL SIDE

Ever the astute researcher, Jack has combined reminiscence, showbiz, the radio hit-parade, and the death of a kingpin, all wrapped around the smooth strains of "Blue Moon." I sent the essay to Bert so that he could read it on the air. I just had to include a note, to wit: "Let me know if you're up to it, Bert. Jack follows the song's thread over the years, but get this, he writes out the Do-wop refrain you know, "...ba da da..." and so forth!" Bert wrote back, "That's fine!"

So Bert steps to the microphone:

HISTORY OF A SONG: "BLUE MOON"

by Jack French

This composition originated in 1933, was first heard in 1934, and underwent several changes over the years. Although the composer never altered a single note, the lyricist changed the title and lyrics four separate times. One version was the last song that Public Enemy #1 John Dillinger ever heard, another one was the theme for my 1953 high school prom, and a Doo Wop version of it topped the radio charts in 1961.

The music for *Blue Moon* was composed by Richard Rodgers in 1933 for the motion picture, *Hollywood Party*, and his lyricist Lorenz Hart titled it "*Prayer*." The song was to be sung by the star, Jean Harlow, but was dropped from the film before it was released. So the public never heard:

*"Oh Lord,
If you ain't busy up there,
I ask for help with a prayer
So please don't give me the air"*

In 1934 MGM wanted a new song that had little to do with the plot in a non-musical film, *Manhattan Melodrama*. So Hart wrote new lyrics and retitled it: "*It's Just That Kind of Play*." Its first lines were supposed to suggest a Broadway production.

*“Act one....
 You gulp your coffee and run
 Into the subway you crowd
 Don't breathe...it's not allowed”*

While Hart was pleased with his second version, the studio officials were not. They demanded a new title and words. Their instructions were obeyed, and the third version was ultimately accepted. The version, entitled “*The Bad in Every Man*,” was inserted into a night club scene with Shirley Ross singing it. It began:

*“Oh Lord...
 What is the matter with me?
 I'm just permitted to see
 The bad in every man....”*

This film starred Clark Gable, William Powell, and Myrna Loy. (The latter two would later co-star in six *Thin Man* films.) Although *Manhattan Melodrama* won an Oscar for best original story, the song received no acclaim.

But it would be the last song John Dillinger ever heard. Immediately after seeing the movie at the Biograph Theater in Chicago on July 22, 1934, he was shot while resisting arrest, and killed by FBI Agents.

Since Hart's third try had flopped, he shortly thereafter created new lyrics to the same melody. This time the title was *Blue Moon*, with this first verse:

*“Blue Moon....
 You saw me standing alone
 Without a dream in my heart
 Without a love of my own”*

That fourth time was the charm. This enchanting love song was enjoyed by the public and would be regularly heard on the radio, sung by a host of popular singers through the 30's and 40's including Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Eckstine, Mel Torme, Frank Sinatra, and Billie Holiday.

Blue Moon was still popular in the 50's, but there was another reason it was selected as the theme for my high school 1953 prom in Rhinelander Wisconsin. It was chosen because our high school student orchestra, conducted by classmate Johnny Schiesmann, only played two songs well: *Blue Moon* and *Tenderly*. Our prom was held in our school's gymnasium, decorated modestly with crepe paper and balloons. My date, Judi Schultz, (who was a year older) and I declared *Blue Moon* to be "our song" and it was...well, until she went off to college and I never saw her again.

Certainly, Elvis was famous for many rock and roll songs, but he also crooned ballads, hymns, and dreamy love songs. In 1956 Elvis released his version of *Blue Moon* and it wasn't much different from the way it had been recorded by the stars of earlier decades.

But not until 1961 did *Blue Moon* reach the upper levels of radio's hit parade when it was recorded by a bi-racial quintette from Pittsburgh, the Marcells. Their Doo Wop version, called by one critic "...an act of beautiful vandalism," captured a large listening audience of kids and adults alike going crazy over it. That recording within three weeks had achieved number one on the *Billboard* rating chart.

Of course, a few fans of the classic Rodgers and Hart tune were appalled when they heard:

*"BOM BA BA BOM BA BOM BA BOM
BOM BA BA BOM BA BA BOM BA BA DANG*

*Blue Moon, you saw me standing alone
Without a dream in my heart
Without a love of my own*

*BOM BA BA BOM BA BOM BA BOM
BOM BA BA BOM BA BA BOM BA BA DANG."*

Even Richard Rodgers could not avoid hearing his lovely tune being played on the radio...far too many times. While he did not declare

so publicly, he hated this version. But lyricist Hart could express no opinion; he had died in 1943 at the age of 48.

Since Hart's death, *Blue Moon* has been one of the most popular songs to be utilized in film; it has been sung by various musicians in multiple motion pictures, including *Grease*, sung by Sha Na Na.

I'm pretty sure Judi Schultz was very impressed.

GRTR

Thank you so much, Bert! That sounded great! We'll have Fred save it so you can use it as an audition tape! Nicely done!

BERT

Thanks! It's quite a story!

GEORGIA ELLIS AND LAWRENCE DOBKIN

I recognize these two actors from "Gunsmoke;" and here they step out to star on the NBC University Theater. They deliver riveting portrayals of two people who meet and try to survive in the midst of the 1918 influenza epidemic. Katherine Anne Porter's "Pale Horse Pale Rider" is poetic in nature, with the narrative changing seamlessly from dream visions to real-time conversations. The delirium is Miranda's (Ellis), and her high strained voice conveys longing and bewilderment.

Sound effects heighten the effect. Hoofbeats at a gallop, distant then closer then fading serve as a motif to signal Miranda's worsening condition. At least thirteen times in the script's 28 minutes do we hear them. Miranda believes that she needs a horse to escape, so she will choose one that she knows is not afraid of bridges. Each galloping vision is different: pains in her chest, a spectral rider, flying arrows, a leopard; a skull; and church bells to signal the Armistice.

The motif in the script that enhances Miranda's terror is repetition. Her friend Adam (Dobkin) tells her: "Get some sleep, get some sleep, get some sleep." The doctor tells her, "We'll go, we'll go, we'll go." Her nurse says, "Shut your eyes, shut your eyes, shut your eyes."

Miranda and Adam sing an old song they knew from the homestead and the oil field. Adam tells her that it has forty verses, at least. "...took away my love; took away my mother, took away my pappy..." Who? The pale rider.

A short passage from Porter's book is, I think, the foundation for the stunning ways in which the audio is pieced together: Miranda thinks: "It is like turning a corner absorbed in your painful thoughts and meeting your state of mind embodied face to face," she said. "It simply knocks you into a cocked hat. It can't just be the weather and the war."

YOUR NEXT ASSIGNMENT

Take a look at the website for Radio Diaries: www.radiodiaries.org

When Ground Zero was Radio Row

For more than four decades, the area around Cortlandt Street in lower Manhattan was the largest collection of radio and electronics stores in the world. Then in 1966 the stores were bulldozed to make way for the new World Trade Center.

It's a fascinating collection of audio research and production.

MUSIC BRIDGE AND NETWORK FEED

Ian Bostridge sings a Scottish folk song put to music by Ottorino Respighi. "The Piper of Dundee," in dialect:

He play'd a spring, the laird to please
a spring brent new frae yont the seas.
and then he gae his bags a wheeze,
and play'd anither key.
And wasn't he a roguy, a roguy, a roguy,
The piper of Dundee?

Beverly is tapping her clipboard towards network feed. Thanks to everyone for tuning in; stay warm and keep those cards and letters coming!

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

Thanks ever,
Mark Anderson
Frederick MD