

HAVE GUN - WILL TRAVEL

Dressed to Kill

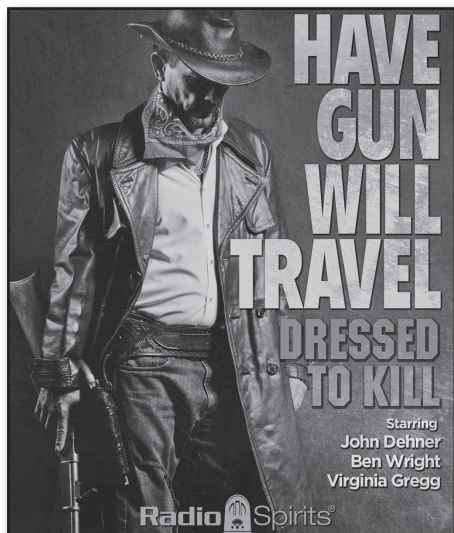
Program Guide by Elizabeth McLeod

Even before television began to cast its cathode-ray glow over a beguiled population, radio was preoccupied with a vital question: how would a sound-only medium survive in a world where you could also see the picture? Even more to the point, which of radio's long-established programs and which of radio's well-upholstered stars could adapt successfully to video? Any issue of any trade publication in the last years before the Second World War might contain speculation to that effect. In the new medium's nascent years, it was anticipated that it would evolve into a natural successor to radio...and that program concepts and personalities alike would have to find ways to translate to television once it was fully entrenched.

But what about television programs making their way to radio? Wasn't that a bit like working on your crawling skills after you'd learned to walk? Radio partisans of the day found that way of thinking a bit offensive, believing the audio medium

to be an art complete unto itself. However, in spite of those creative purists, there was little real thought of television as a feeder for radio...especially after television stepped out from behind that corner it was long reputed to be lurking around and plopped itself down securely in a corner of the Great American Living Room.

Nevertheless, there were suggestions that such a thing might come to pass. In fact, as far back as 1949, the possibilities began to present themselves. That's when CBS Tele-



vision's successful revival of *The Goldbergs* brought that long-defunct favorite of daytime radio back to the aural medium in a spiffed-up half-hour format using the same cast as the TV series. There was also the matter of *My Little Margie*, an air-puffed small screen sitcom that, despite the unrelenting inanity of its scripts, was easily and successfully transposed to radio. It managed to fill, to the satisfaction of increasingly-marginalized CBS radio sales executives, a timeslot that might otherwise have gone unsold. And over on NBC, children whose appetite for the seltzer-spraying intrigues of *The Howdy Doody Show* were left unslaked by a five-day-a-week television diet thereof, could indulge further in a Saturday morning radio version.

So it was not entirely unprecedented -- or even unexpected, really -- when CBS brought the successful TV Western drama *Have Gun - Will Travel* to radio in 1958. But what was unexpected was that the audio-only version surpassed, in overall quality, even the high standard achieved by the televised original. That, at least, was something that hadn't happened before. And given the short amount of life that traditional radio drama had left, it would not happen again.

Despite having begun on television, *Have Gun - Will Travel* actually had its deepest roots in radio. It was the logical extension of a trend that began on radio at the start of the 1950s. Broadcast westerns had long been dismissed as kiddie fare -- hackneyed melodramas populated by stereotypical white-hatted heroes battling black-hatted bad-guy villains across an ill-defined sagebrush landscape dotted by interchangeable board-and-batten towns. While pre-adolescent boys lapped those series up (to the immense gratification of the cereal manufacturers and white-bread bakeries that sponsored them), such programs received little attention from serious listeners or serious radio writers. The few exceptions to those simplistic offerings tended to go to the other extreme -- dry, didactic "historical dramas" with little sense of realism in the construction of characters or situations. Though motion pictures of the 1930s and 1940s made great strides in turning the Western into a genre for thinking adult audiences, radio seemed willing to trot lazily along the path laid out by the Lone Ranger and his various broadcast clones.

Until, that is, the rise of television triggered a fresh wave of creativity among those producers, directors, and writers determined to keep radio drama alive. First came a new, realistic approach to contemporary crime drama -- shoving aside the flamboyant private eyes of the 1940s in favor of carefully drawn, well-rounded crime-solvers. And on the heels of that trend came the rise of radio's Adult Westerns. It started with *Gunsmoke*, which evolved from the collaboration

of producer Norman Macdonnell (right) and writer John Meston. When that landmark series premiered in 1952, it was unlike any other Western drama radio listeners had ever heard. The term “noir” was not yet in use in entertainment criticism in the early 1950s -- but if it was, it would have been applied to this intense, uncompromising depiction of “the violence that moved west with Young America,” and to the program’s introspective, brooding protagonist Matt Dillon.



Norman Macdonnell (left) with William Conrad

The success of *GunsSmoke* ensured that the Adult Western would become a rising trend in what remained of dramatic radio. Over the next several years, a number of programs in a similar vein went out over the airwaves. *GunsSmoke* also carried the trend to television. Its 1955 premiere inspired an entire wave of well-written, well-acted, indifferently filmed half-hour western dramas. Some of these new TV series tried to clone the *GunsSmoke* formula a bit too closely, but one that managed to stand on its own was a creation of writers Sam Rolfe (below) and Herb Meadow: *Have Gun - Will Travel*.

Rolfe was one of the many talented young men to filter into radio’s West Coast writing pool in the years after the Second World War. He began his career as a contributor to *Suspense*, and then moved on to various detective and crime thrillers of the postwar period. He also made his mark as a screenwriter, specializing in action-adventure, and earned an Oscar nomination scripting the James Stewart western *The Naked Spur*. Herb Meadow followed a parallel course, also contributing to *Suspense* before finding his own way into screenwriting. Meadow knew the tropes of the juvenile western, having contributed to the television version of *The Lone Ranger*, but he also knew how to avoid them. It was Meadow who came up with the initial concept for a drama dealing with a refined, intelligent troubleshooter-for-hire. An ad for an at-liberty vaudeville comedian in a trade publication, promising “Have Tux - Will Travel,” gave Meadow the inspiration for his show’s title. He envisioned the series in a modern-day setting -- but when he presented the format to CBS Television in late 1956, the network suggested that the format would be more appealing to sponsors as a Western. When he agreed to make that change, CBS commissioned a pilot film and, upon viewing it, commissioned a full series for the fall of 1957. Meadow, realizing that he could not handle the assignment



Sam Rolfe



Richard Boone as Paladin

by himself, turned to fellow Universal Pictures contract writer Rolfe and convinced him to join the production as a full partner.

Have Gun - Will Travel, with debonair Richard Boone (left) as the enigmatic gunslinger Paladin, was an immediate hit for CBS Television. The hero's travels from his home base in San Francisco to serve clients throughout the West afforded the series the scope of an anthology. New characters with new problems to solve could be introduced every week -- but Paladin himself, and his Asian assistant "Hey Boy," provided the recurring anchors necessary to retain and build audience interest. And the ambiguity of Paladin himself -- a man willing

to take up arms for anyone who could pay his price, but who lived by a stern personal code -- carried more depth than was typically found in the increasingly formulaic television of the late 1950s.

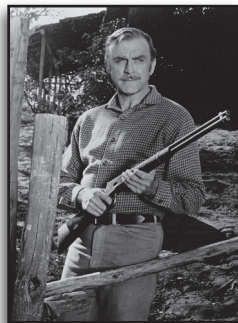
Norman Macdonnell observed the success of *Have Gun - Will Travel* with considerable interest. He was frustrated and annoyed with CBS just then, having lost creative control of the television version of *Gunsmoke*. Macdonnell considered *Have Gun*, with its darker and less-conventional vision, a superior program to that series. There were also programming voices at CBS so impressed by the quality of *Have Gun* that thought was given to how they might further capitalize upon it. Whoever came up with the idea first, by the end of *Have Gun*'s first year on television, steps were underway to bring the property to CBS Radio as well.

Macdonnell, still running the radio version of *Gunsmoke* at the time, was responsible for the casting of that venture. He had a pool of CBS-Hollywood talent that he had long featured in his various series. To fill the role of Paladin, he reached into this roster of regulars and pulled out the dignified, distinctive character actor John Dehner (right). Dehner was one of Macdonnell's favorite performers, having worked with him frequently during his tenure at *Escape*. In fact, he had been Macdonnell's first choice for the role of Matt Dillon on *Gunsmoke*. Dehner had turned down that offer, fearing that he would end up typed as a "cowboy actor." Nevertheless, he appeared frequently on that series in guest roles -- sometimes as Dillon's ally, but more often as an adversary. He had

shed his fear of typecasting by the time he was offered the lead role on another CBS Radio western, *Frontier Gentleman*. On that program, Dehner created the distinctively different role of roaming English newspaperman J. B. Kendall. He was suave and smooth in this series, but with clear evidence of an iron core. *Frontier Gentleman* ended the week before *Have Gun - Will Travel* began, leaving Dehner willing and able to take on the new role.

The radio and television Paladins were intended to be the same character. In fact, most of the episodes in the first season were direct adaptations of scripts already used on television. However, the success of the radio series stemmed from Dehner's decision not to try to duplicate Richard Boone's interpretation of the character -- going so far as to completely ignore the television series and to operate as though *Have Gun* was exclusively a radio program. The radio Paladin was his own man. It makes for an interesting study to contrast the approach of the two different actors to the same episodes. They are similar -- but they are by no means identical. It was that sense of distinctiveness in interpretation, coupled with Norman Macdonnell's constant determination to maintain an impeccably high level of quality in every aspect of the production, that gave the radio *Have Gun* an identity of its own. And when Macdonnell stepped down from the series in 1959, his longtime Associate Producer Frank Paris carried on that commitment without breaking stride.

Drama, however, was no longer a viable concern for CBS. Affiliates bristled at the co-option of their time by network schedules, time they could better monetize by selling it to local sponsors for inexpensive disk-jockey programs. With affiliate pressure building as the fall of 1960 approached, the network confirmed long-rumored plans to shut down most dramatic production at its Hollywood radio center. Only *Gunsmoke* would continue to broadcast from the Coast. *Have Gun - Will Travel* would air its final first-run radio episode on November 27th, bringing to an end one of the last great accomplishments of the classic radio era. The television *Have Gun* continued into 1963, and went on to become a staple of early evening syndication for as long as black-and-white television remained viable. It still turns up from time to time on nostalgia-oriented cable channels. The radio *Have Gun - Will Travel* also had a surprising second life when it was included in a package of classic-radio reruns distributed to American troops overseas by the Armed/American Forces Radio and Television



John Dehner

Service. And it surfaced yet again in various syndication packages distributed to domestic radio stations during the nostalgia craze of the 1970s. It only had a two year run at the very end of the radio era, and it was always in the shadow of its television progenitor -- but thanks to the dedication of Herb Meadow, Sam Rolfe, Norman Macdonnell, Frank Paris, and John Dehner, the radio *Have Gun - Will Travel* remains a fine example of radio's creative power.

JOHN DEHNER
as
PALADIN
in
HAVE GUN - WILL TRAVEL

With Ben Wright as "Hey Boy"
and Virginia Gregg as "Miss Wong"

Created by Herb Meadow and Sam Rolfe

Sound Effects by
Tom Hanley
Bill James
Gus Bayz

Produced and Directed by
Frank Paris

CD 1A: "French Leave" - 01/17/1960

Paladin goes in pursuit of a renegade French criminal.
Written by William N. Robson.

CD 1B: "Nataemhon" - 01/24/1960

A disgraced doctor has been living for ten years with Indians...until Paladin is hired to find him. Written by Ann Doud.

CD 2A: "Bad Bert" - 01/31/1960

Paladin is put on the trail of an English nobleman who is roaming the West in the guise of a shady road agent. Written by Ann Doud.

CD 2B: "The Boss" - 02/07/1960

A Colorado ruffian hires Paladin to help him take over a town.
Written by Ann Doud.

CD 3A: “Bring Him Back Alive” - 02/14/1960

Paladin’s job is to bring in a renegade deputy sheriff who killed the son of a political opponent. Written by Arthur Lewis.

CD 3B: “That Was No Lady” - 02/21/1960

Paladin is hired to close down and clear out a notorious saloon...but he didn’t reckon on the fearsome proprietress. Written by William N. Robson.

CD 4A: “The Dollhouse in Diamond Springs” - 02/28/1960

Paladin is sent in search of \$20,000 from a bank robbery. Written by Frank Paris.

CD 4B: “Somebody Out There Hates Me” - 03/06/1960

A convict sent to a Mexican prison by Paladin is free...and out for revenge. Written by Tom Hanley.

CD 5A: “Montana Vendetta” - 03/13/1960

On a mission to protect a woman from an assassin, Paladin’s rescued from an avalanche...by the assassin. Written by Ann Doud.

CD 5B: “Caesar’s Wife” - 03/20/1960

Hired as a bodyguard by a notorious gunman, Paladin finds himself in the line of fire. Written by William N. Robson.

CD 6A: “They Told Me You Were Dead” - 03/27/1960

Paladin encounters a former lover...whose sons have been taken prisoner by Indians. Written by Tom Hanley.

CD 6B: “Shanghai Is A Verb” - 04/03/1960

When Hey Boy goes missing, Paladin sets out in pursuit. Written by William N. Robson.

CD 7A: “So True, Mr. Barnum” - 04/10/1960

When Hey Boy and his friends spend a large sum to buy a treasure map, Paladin gets involved in the investigation. Written by Ann Doud.

CD 7B: “Prunella’s Fella” - 04/17/1960

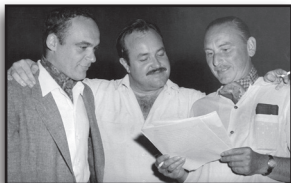
Paladin is hired to locate a lost silver mine...but finds more than he bargains for. Written by Ray Kemper.



Virginia Gregg is heard as
Miss Wong.

CD 8A: “Irish Luck” - 04/24/1960

Paladin’s new friend is accused of robbery and murder. Written by Ann Doud.



Ben Wright (right) is heard as Hey Boy.

CD 8B: “Dressed to Kill” - 05/01/1960

Assigned to deliver a railroad payroll, Paladin runs into a kidnapping. Written by Rod Peterson.

CD 9A: “Pat Murphy” - 05/08/1960

Paladin is on the trail of a bounty hunter who has arrested a doctor...to bring that doctor back to help with a medical emergency! Written by Ann Doud.

CD 9B: “Lena Countryman” - 05/15/1960

Paladin gets involved with a schoolteacher marked for death by a ruthless gunman. Written by Frank Paris.

CD 10A: “Lucky Penny” - 05/22/1960

A played-out gold mine is suddenly paying off again...or is it? Written by Ann Doud.

CD 10B: “Dusty” - 05/29/1960

A little boy hires Paladin to protect him from his cruel uncle. Written by Ray Kemper.

Elizabeth McLeod is a journalist, author, and broadcast historian. She received the 2005 Ray Stanich Award for excellence in broadcasting history research from the Friends Of Old Time Radio.



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