

# THE WHISTLER

## Murder In Haste

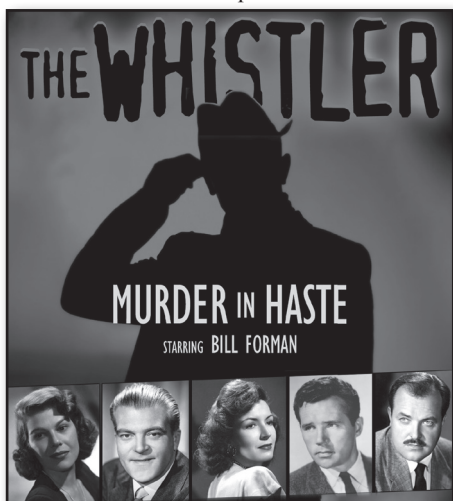
Program Guide by Ivan G. Shreve, Jr.

May 16, 1942 has always been a special date for fans of old-time radio, since it marked the debut of one of the medium's best mystery anthology programs. Introduced by a haunting whistling melody (which composer Wilbur Hatch wagered could only be successfully executed by 1 in 20 people), The Whistler would then segue into this sinister-sounding statement:

*I...am the Whistler, and I know many things, for I walk by night. I know many strange tales, many secrets hidden in the hearts of men and women who have stepped into the shadows. Yes... I know the nameless terrors of which they dare not speak!*

So just *why* was this unsettling individual walking by night? Insomnia? In the early years of the program, creator J. Donald Wilson had his omniscient narrator function as half-Greek chorus, half-conscience to the protagonists in his tales. Whether it be a spouse determined to do away with their better half or

an individual who decided to fast-track the American Dream by taking an illegal financial shortcut, The Whistler would directly interact with the luckless saps...goading them to the point of no return. The O. Henry-inspired denouements remain the most memorable aspect of *The Whistler* some eighty-odd years later. Just when you thought the protagonist was going to triumph, Fate turned up to make certain they took a huge fall on a banana peel in the form of the one detail they overlooked.



When producer George W. Allen assumed Wilson's duties in 1944, he established as one of his prime production rules that *The Whistler* was now there only to narrate—not motivate the plot. (The other rule was that scripts had to maintain a set degree of plausibility.) It was formulaic, but durable—*The Whistler* enjoyed a successful thirteen-year run on radio (ringing down the curtain on September 22, 1955). Considering that the program was broadcast mainly over CBS' West Coast network, it is interesting that the program was so successful. (It was often trumpeted in the show's opening as having been "rated tops in popularity for a longer period of time than any other West Coast program.") The series was sponsored by the largest independent oil company on the West Coast, Signal Oil (founded in 1922). And yet, less than two years after its radio debut, *The Whistler* was accessible to both coasts when Columbia Pictures kicked off a movie franchise with its film version of *The Whistler* in 1944.

Both Wilson and CBS received recognition in the opening credits of *The Whistler*, directed by future P.T. Barnum-schlockmeister William Castle. The picture starred Richard Dix as a despondent businessman who arranges for a contract to be put out on his own life...and then finds himself unable to cancel the deal when he has second thoughts. Since Castle had not yet acquired access to flying skeletons or electrical charges in the theatre seats at this time, he went and used Dix as the gimmick. He cast him as the lead in each of the four *Whistler* films he directed. (The actor would be utilized in the same manner in the other series entries as well.) This allowed the Dix to move back-and-forth between good guy and bad guy roles. After finishing the seventh film in the *Whistler* franchise, *The 13th Hour* (1947), Dix suffered a series of cardiac episodes that forced him into retirement...so he wasn't able to make time for the final *Whistler* programmer, *The Return of the Whistler* (1948).



*The Whistler* movie poster

There were a few attempts to bring *The Whistler* radio program to East Coast audiences during its initial run on the air. In the summer of 1946, the show was pressed into service as a replacement for Jack Carson (Wednesday nights at 8pm from July to September), while Milwaukee's favorite son took vacation time. This allowed *The Whistler* to walk by night on behalf of Campbell Soups. From March 26, 1947 to September 29, 1948, an East Coast version was sponsored by Household Finance. There had even once been a Chicago version (airing on WBBM) that featured local actors. Meister Brau beer payed

the bills for that Windy City experiment, while Signal Oil continued to sponsor the show on the West Coast.

In 1946, *Radio Life* asked *Whistler* producer George Allen what goes into making a good mystery airtel. He answered: “An interesting, well-adapted story, a competent cast, the right sound effects, effective mood music and perfect timing.” His program certainly checked off every box. The “effective, mood music” was composed by Wilbur Hatch and, as mentioned earlier, Hatch opined that only one person in twenty could whistle the famous 37-note theme melody. For many years, one person pretty much did: Dorothy Roberts. (During the war, she had to get permission from Lockheed to take a break from her factory job in order to be at the broadcast and “whistle” while she worked.)

Bernie Surrey—famous for the “sound patterns” used in the classic *Suspense* broadcast of “Sorry, Wrong Number”—was in charge of *The Whistler*’s sound effects. (Two additional effects men, Gene Twombly and Ross Murray, later worked the show.) The “perfect timing” aspect of the program was overseen by engineer Robert Anderson. The scripts for *The Whistler* were freelanced, but script supervisors Harold “Bud” Swanton and Joel Malone were on hand to ensure seamless continuity.

The strength of *The Whistler* undoubtedly came from its repertory company of Radio Row regulars, some of whom appeared so frequently they were jokingly referred to as “*Whistler*’s children.” Each actor served a particular purpose for producer George Allen. If Allen had a character who was probably going to plot his murder methodically, with slide rule and instruments, he’d have his secretary call Joseph Kearns. Elliott Lewis was the perfect Everyman, and it stood to reason that his real-life wife Cathy Lewis would be ideal for “Everywoman” roles. For catty women with an irritating sense of superiority, Betty Lou Gerson got the nod. The highest compliment was perhaps paid to Lurene Tuttle (right). According to Allen, she could “be anything.” He went on to say that she “may change her performance on the air as she finds another facet of her character; she picks out the parts of her characterization that didn’t ring right in rehearsal and corrects them.”

Announcer Marvin Miller reportedly started picking up movie roles as a result of his work on *The Whistler*. The program also served as a launching pad for the



Lurene Tuttle

careers of actors like Howard Duff and William Conrad. Future movie stars Jeff Chandler and Mercedes McCambridge were also occasionally heard on the show. When it comes to radio acting, however, it's hard to beat the talent on the *Whistler* bench: Joan Banks, Gloria Blondell, John Brown, Hans Conried, Frank Lovejoy, Wally Maher, Gerald Mohr, and Jeanette Nolan, to name a few of the many.

The identity of *The Whistler* was a well-kept secret for nearly a decade, until it was revealed in November 1951 that he was voiced by actor-announcer Bill Forman. He was the only actor to receive credit, but Joseph Kearns and Gale Gordon played the role in the early years, and Marvin Miller (right) did the job while Forman was in the service. In addition, Everett Clarke was *The Whistler* in the 1947 Chicago series, and one-time *Shadow* William Johnstone did the walking by night during the 1947-48 *Household Finance* run. After Forman's participation in the show was revealed, he said, "I'm proud to be 'The Whistler' and I wanted people to know it." When Jack Benny did his famous parody of *The Whistler* on his May 20, 1946 broadcast ("The Fiddler"), writer George Balzer convinced his boss to hire Forman to do the *Whistler* character...not knowing that Bill was one of those twenty people who couldn't whistle the tune. (Fortunately, Balzer could.)

Bill Forman would reprise the role of *The Whistler* when the radio series was adapted to the small screen for a syndicated TV version in 1954. Sadly, the TV version didn't take off. Its radio cousin, however, continues to be popular among old-time radio fans. We know that "even when you know who's guilty, you always receive a startling surprise at the final curtain." Whenever I tune in to *The Whistler*, I'm reminded of the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson: "There is no den in the wide world to hide a rogue. Commit a crime and the earth is made of glass. Commit a crime, and it seems as if a coat of snow fell on the ground, such as reveals in the woods the track of every partridge, and fox, and squirrel."

**The following broadcasts of *The Whistler* star Bill Forman as the titular narrator and are sponsored by Signal Oil (unless otherwise indicated). The shows are produced by George W. Allen, with music by Wilbur Hatch, and script supervision by Harold Swanton.**

#### **CD 1A: "Miracle on Forty-Ninth Street" - December 31, 1945**

Cop killer Eddie Steckels is going to need a miracle to beat his latest murder rap. A friend of Eddie's finds it in a drugstore: a man named Oliver Littlefield, who

could be Steckels' twin brother! William Johnstone is heard in this broadcast, along with announcer Marvin Miller.

### **CD 1B: "Treasure Hunt" – January 21, 1946**

Before Grandpa Randolph passed away, he hid a \$200,000 fortune. He was kind enough to leave behind a clue as to where it might be found. Marvin Miller is the announcer for this story, which features Mandel Kramer and Gerald Mohr.



Marvin Miller

### **CD 2A: "Murder in Haste" - February 25, 1946**

Elbert Taylor has a violent quarrel with his wealthy wife Helen that results in her death. Beating a hasty retreat from Florida, he dodges a suspicious detective by switching identities with a famous mystery writer. Joseph Kearns stars in this broadcast, along with Gerald Mohr and Elliott Lewis. Marvin Miller is the announcer.

### **CD 2B: "The Trigger Man" - March 25, 1946**

Attorney Martin Lane may have sold his soul to the Devil...but at least the pay is good. As mouthpiece to mobster Branch Malone, Lane will eventually be required to do more than just mount an air-tight defense. William Conrad and Wally Maher are heard in this episode, along with announcer Marvin Miller.

### **CD 3A: "Three Times a Sinner" - April 1, 1946**

Gerald Hunter longs for the sweet release of death as administered by his long-suffering spouse Lydia. So why does he keep making things difficult for her to carry out his wishes? Marvin Miller is the announcer for this story, which stars Joseph Kearns.

### **CD 3B: "Terror Stricken" - April 8, 1946**

Accountant Benjamin Reynolds' career took off like a Roman candle a decade ago as the star witness against Andrew Miller. Now that Miller's finished serving his time, he's anxious to settle the score. William Johnstone, Gale Gordon, and Ruth Perrott are heard in this broadcast, along with announcer Marvin Miller.



Gerald Mohr

#### **CD 4A: “Smart Boy” - April 15, 1946**

Verna Sheldon has replaced Steve Collins with Randy Sommers in her blackmail operation...and Steve is none too happy about it. He'll soon have bigger things to worry about – like fashioning an alibi -- when the two-timing Verna winds up under a sheet in the morgue. Marvin Miller is the announcer for this episode, which features Wally Maher, Gerald Mohr (left), and Jay Novello.

#### **CD 4B: “The Waterford Case” - April 22, 1946**

The Waterford family is a veritable hive of hatred, jealousy, and murder. There's a substantial inheritance involved, and Elaine Waterford is determined to keep that out of her cousin Richard's hands. Gerald Mohr and Earle Ross are heard in this story, along with announcer Marvin Miller.

#### **CD 5A: “The Judas Face” - June 3, 1946**

Motion picture starlet Sandra Dane is crestfallen when her “million-dollar face” can't be restored by plastic surgery after she's injured in a freak accident. Convinced that stand-in Janet Blaisdell is responsible, she plots an elaborate revenge. Mary Lansing and Gerald Mohr are heard in this episode, along with announcer Marvin Miller.

#### **CD 5B: “Quiet Sunday” - June 10, 1946**

Henry Parker's wife Ruth demands more time and attention from him...but so does his mistress Daphne. His dreams of a weekend respite continue to go sour when one of them takes a tumble down some stairs and winds up dead. Marvin Miller is the announcer for this story, which features Joseph Kearns and Mary Lansing.

#### **CD 6A: “Custom Built Blonde” - July 15, 1946**

Hoodlum Jerry Coonan and his confederates carry out a jewel robbery on a blonde. The victim pulled out a gun and shot two of the men before dying, so Jerry is forced to clean up the unexpected mess. Jack Moyles and William Conrad are heard in this broadcast, along with announcer Marvin Miller.

### **CD 6B: “The Witness at the Fountain” - September 9, 1946**

Newspaper columnist Randy Dean will do anything to rid himself of a blackmailer named Broden. Surely a man as methodical as Dean won't make any mistakes while getting the job done. Marvin Miller is the announcer for this broadcast, which features Howard Duff, Margaret Brayton, William Conrad, and Jay Novello.

### **CD 7A: “The Brass Ring” - September 16, 1946**

A millionaire becomes infatuated with a carnival dancer and marries her, making her quite financially comfortable. Unfortunately, the wife finds her new life entirely suffocating. Is there any way to escape? Doris Singleton, Eddie Marr, and William Conrad are heard in this episode, along with announcer Dick Wells.

### **CD 7B: “Stranger in the House” - September 23, 1946**

Helen Van Norton's brother hasn't been heard from in six years. According to her attorney, he can be declared legally dead after one more year. When she receives word that he's returned, she's convinced that he's an imposter. Virginia Gregg (below), Gerald Mohr, Paul Frees, and Sam Edwards are heard in this story, along with announcer Marvin Miller.

### **CD 8A: “Weak Sister” - October 14, 1946**

Village police chief Ethan Haskell has been pronounced dead, a victim of poisoning. His brother Enoch, the coroner, is convinced that spinster sisters Bertina and Amanda Sterling are responsible. Marvin Miller is the announcer for this story, which features Martha Wentworth and Peggy Webber.

### **CD 8B: “Masquerade” - October 21, 1946**

Sam Baxter appears to have successfully managed to scotch the romance between his brother Joe and Irene Carney, a girl who works at his casino. In fact, Irene shoots and kills Joe in a fit of passion and must now take it on the lam. (The October 20, 1946 *Jack Benny Show* parody of *The Whistler* [“The Fiddler”] is referenced at the beginning of this show.) Lurene Tuttle, Charles McGraw, and Ken Christy are heard in this broadcast, along with announcer Marvin Miller.



Virginia Gregg

### **CD 9A: “Backfire” - October 28, 1946**

A chauffeur discovers that his employer’s wife is seeing a bandleader on the side. So the driver decides to murder his boss and pin it on the wife. Marvin Miller is the announcer for this episode, which features Cathy Lewis, Gerald Mohr, and Ruth Perrott.



Betty Lou Gerson

### **CD 9B: “The Deadly Penny” - November 11, 1946**

Millie Parker’s boss has given her \$45,000 in non-negotiable bonds to place in the company’s safe deposit box. She plans to swipe the bonds with the help of her estranged husband Yancey...then learns that the company’s audit hasn’t been completed! Wally Maher, Betty Lou Gerson (above), and Barney Phillips are heard in this story, along with announcer Marvin Miller.

### **CD 10A: “Next Year is Mine” - December 23, 1946**

Prisoner Johnny Hale tries to appeal to the better angels of Warden Conroy's nature, and requests that penitentiary employees stop reading the personal correspondence of his cellmate Ed Halliday...who’s not expected to live through the holidays. Marvin Miller is the announcer for this broadcast, which features Charles Seel, Frank Lovejoy, and Paul Frees.

### **CD 10B: “Murder on Rourke Island” - December 30, 1946**

Matt thought his father’s longtime ultimatum of “the money or the girl” would vanish at the time of his passing. But when his uncle Matt is appointed executor of the estate, the new boss is the same as the old boss. Charles Seel and David Ellis are heard in this episode, along with announcer Marvin Miller.



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