

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



THE JOURNEYMEN ISSUE
SEPTEMBER 20, 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.

It’s wonderful weather these days, just right for traveling, and that’s exactly what our guest has done. A hearty welcome to Jack French, our first guest in the new GRTR Studio! Jack gives us a wave from the sound booth where he

and Chuck are coaxing the old board into bringing out the sound. We've had our coffee and scones in the Mud Room, and now Joanie and I are at our pine-slab table sifting through the dusty old courier pouch. Chuck twists a knob and pipes in the sweet vocal sounds of Bill Withers, singing his signature tune "Lean on Me," with his rhythm and blues band.

Joanie is looking at the clock as we go to network feed. Jack walks over and settles in at the table.

ON THE AIR

GRTR:

Hello everyone and I want everyone to help us welcome our friend, writer, and actor, Jack French, who's been on the road these past few days. Where are you headed now?

JACK:

I'm on schedule now to give lectures at a couple of venues in the Catskills, and after that I'll find a cabin for a few days' relaxation in the misty woods.

GRTR:

That's right, you're well into your new project of giving lecturing on American history and famous characters, quite the undertaking.

JACK:

Keeps me busy, and I must say that I'm delighted to be here. Say, that was a nice song Chuck played just now.

GRTR:

Yes, that's from a 1972 Carnegie Hall concert; and Bill Withers is from a town called Slab Fork West Virginia; that's where he got his start playing music in talent shows, and he went on from there.

JACK:

How about that! On the way up here I had the pleasure of visiting Morgantown West Virginia.

GRTR:

Oh wait...that's the hometown of Don Knotts, isn't it? Do they still remember him there?

JACK:

It is his hometown....hey, you have a good memory. Don grew up there and went to high school and college there. And his hometown recalls him well. Now they even have a life-size statue of him on the main street. However, I thought the statue looked more like Orville Redenbacher, but what do I know?

GRTR:

Does the statue depict him as Barney Fife? I suspect most people remember him for that.

JACK:

No, he's just wearing a business suit, but he is holding a Mayberry PD hat on his lap. And about three blocks from his statue is the Morgantown Historical Museum where they have a large section devoted to Don's TV and movie career.

GRTR:

And also, of course, his radio career, I suppose?

JACK:

Sadly no....his five years as a major character on Mutual's *Bobby Benson* daily radio show are totally ignored. I asked the museum curator about this omission and she told me that none of their visitors know, or care, about his radio work.

GRTR:

Didn't I read in a back issue of *Radio Recall* that you had once talked on the phone with Don about *Bobby Benson*?

JACK:

Oh gosh, yes, it was many years ago. I heard that Don was back in town for his high school reunion. A news clipping gave me the name of the reunion chairman, so I looked up that phone number and

called. He agreed to make Don available on the phone the next night.

GRTR:

And he did?

JACK:

Yes, so Don and I chatted for a while about that radio show of which he had many fond memories. Before we hung up, I asked him why he left radio. He replied sadly, "Heck, I didn't leave radio....radio left me!"

GRTR:

So, Don had a leading radio role on this kids' adventure show. Why do you think it was so important in his entertainment career?

JACK:

Well, not only was he heard portraying "Windy Wales" in this popular half hour network show on Mutual virtually every day, but he toured during the summers with the young actor playing the *Bobby Benson* title role, appearing at state fairs, conventions, and other live events.

GRTR:

Didn't Don talk about those tours in his 1999 autobiography, *Barney Fife and Other Characters I Have Known*?

JACK:

Absolutely. Remember, though, he wasn't being paid for these summer trips, but he managed to use them to improve his entertainment skills and help his career. On these tours, whenever he could, he would also schedule comedy appearances at local night clubs or hotel lounges, polishing his acts as the "Nervous Weather Man" or whatever character he was developing for live audiences.

GRTR:

Any other ways you can think of that the *Bobby Benson* show boosted Don's showbiz career?

JACK:

Sure, for another thing, *Bobby Benson* got popular enough for WGN to create a TV version for local viewing. It was filmed live in a nearby theatre so Don might have three or four radio shows a week, plus 2

rehearsals for the TV show before shooting what would be a half hour performance.

GRTR:

So, he not only grew as a radio actor on this western series, he also learned the different skills needed as a television actor, including line memorization.

JACK:

Right you are, Lefty. In fact, his entry into his first TV serial came about as a direct result of another cast member in the *Bobby Benson* show.

GRTR:

And who was that?

JACK:

Charles Irving, who was playing the character of Tex Mason on that show. Well, Irving started branching out as a director and producer in television. Irving was responsible for creating *Search for Tomorrow* and he cast his pal, Don Knotts, in that 15-minute TV soap opera.

GRTR:

So what role did Don have on *Search for Tomorrow*? Don't tell me he played a bumbling husband with an overbearing wife?

JACK:

Not really. His character was Wilbur Peterson, a neurotic who was afraid of everyone except his sister.

GRTR:

I'm beginning to see a trend here. Nervous Wilbur....The Nervous Weatherman.... Mr. Chicken.....The Nervous Guy on the Steve Allen show...

JACK:

Well said, ol' buddy. And the truth is...that nervous act wasn't that far from Don's real inner self. I've talked to people from the *Bobby Benson* show, including the director, the primary writer, and the chaperone who was with the troupe on tour. They all agree Don was not only a nervous soul, but also a hypochondriac.

GRTR:

And yet he parlayed all those issues into success in radio, night clubs, TV and the movies.

JACK:

That he did, although the Morgantown Museum prefers only to feature TV and the motion picture work that he became famous for.

GRTR:

It's really strange, don't you think, that after his five years portraying the old codger, Windy Wales, on the *Bobby Benson* radio series, neither is even mentioned in his museum exhibit. You think that omission was done on purpose?

JACK:

Yup, but that's the times we live in. Of course, his television work, including his Emmy's, plus his movie roles, apparently dominate the public's current perception of his place in the performing arts. I feel sad about that, because there was so much more.

GRTR:

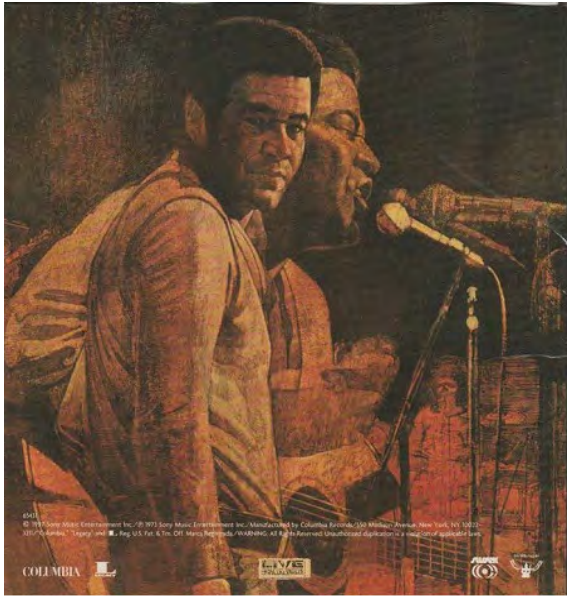
Well, I guess that makes it more important for OTR fans like you and me to continue to spread the word to the masses about the importance of vintage radio and the impact it had on our society in that period.

JACK:

I couldn't have said it better.

MUSIC BRIDGE AND COMMERCIAL

Now Joanie is tapping her clipboard; time to look not so much at the Dayton Dragons, but at Fall Ball in the Arizona Fall League. The Saguaros beat the Desert Dogs at a sold-out Talking Stick Field in Phoenix. These games are where Major League prospects are getting a feel for high-level coaching and instruction, hoping to make their way to the Big Show. It's serious play in a good-natured setting, devoted fans, the big sky and desert breeze. Chuck is piping in another Bill Withers chart-topper from years past, "World Keeps Going 'Round," Carnegie Hall 1972.



BULLETIN BOARD

Here are a couple of websites; Club members Martin Grams and Jack French:

<https://martingrams.blogspot.com/>

<http://www.jackfrenchlectures.com/>

Jack's new lecture series has a nice variety of offerings, and he has costume attire at the ready for the treasure trove of topics on American history and personalities, for instance: The Gangster Era, Women in Sound Effects, and the Carolyn Keene phenomenon.

Martin continues his prodigious work on all aspects of nostalgia. His Blogspot essays offer excellent detail on current finds and research topics: recently, "The Shadow: 1940 Cliffhanger Serial." I also used Martin's Cavalcade of America encyclopedia for an old-time radio presentation that I gave here at my retirement community: I talked about how Dupont drew top-notch talent, and I played a 30-minute drama about agriculture, from 1941. Quite the conversation-starter! Residents talked about their family memories of radio and were happy that old familiar shows are still available today.

MUSIC STING AND NETWORK FEED

Chuck is piping in a song that Bill Withers wrote after talking to an American soldier who was wounded in battle, "I Can't Write Left-Handed." Joanie follows the sweep of the clock and signals network feed. Soup and sandwiches in the Mud Room, anyone? But of course!

Thanks ever,

Mark A.

Reading PA