

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



THE RATTLETRAP ISSUE

SEPTEMBER 3, 2021

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.

Our studio crew is ready from our homes along the Catoclin Range. Bert and Beverly are watching the sweep of the clock towards network feed; Fred has coaxed the creaking old sound board past its squawks and hums, and he’s piping in the frantic dance orchestration of Aaron Copland’s “Rodeo,” with soaring raw strings and xylophone, helped along by a pulsing string bass. The

album is Copland's music for ballet, called "Populist," just the ticket to get us thinking of the stretches of Florida's Panhandle pine forests and sandy trails where I took a cycling vacation years ago. Stormy weather is upon us now as thunderstorms are coursing their way through the valleys and rivers of the mid-Atlantic.

ON THE AIR

Hello everyone and welcome to the broadcast. Thanks for tuning in! I've had my sandwich and pastry and now I'm looking over the contents of the old Courier Pouch. I keep it sanitized but we still call it Dusty. Messages is our theme; Club members have been mindful of my plaintive call. Wendy Wilmer has sent us a heartfelt personal profile; we have a couple of pieces to share from the GRTR Archives; and Frank Morgan has sent in notes of his success in radio research and running the urban streets worldwide. We'll get him on the phone pretty soon now.

WENDY WILMER, CENTER-STAGE

A couple of days ago Fred talked with Wendy on the phone. He recorded the conversation, and it serves as Wendy's life story, her inaugural address.

Fred has enhanced Wendy's recording by adding a bit of a show tune, "The Glamourous Life," from *A Little Night Music*, sung by Renée Fleming.

Wendy is our new Club President, modest and forthright as she seeks direction for the Club. Fred's recording of her thoughts:

OTR is one of my newer discoveries and passions. I remember my mother playing the radio. I would lie on the floor under the dining room table (sometimes eating a banana) and listen. I don't remember what shows she listened to, but radio was one of the happy delights in a life that was not easy for her. It seemed to give her comfort. The only thing I remember hearing was the song *This Old Man*. I don't know why I remember that, but every time I hear a snip of that song, I am back in Chicago under the dining room table!

Since discovering the club, I listen to at least a couple of OTR programs every day. The Big Broadcast is of course a staple, which I supplement with *Have Gun Will Travel*, *The Six Shooter*, *Our Miss Brooks*... Well, I can hardly list *all* of them! A couple of years ago I stumbled across a show

called *Speed Gibson of the International Secret Police*. It had Gale Gordon as a villain. It was a blast. The shows help me to time out my daily exercise routine, which keeps me on my feet. You could almost say that Old Time Radio has been good for my health!

I am grateful to Hank Ickes for introducing me to the club and to Jack French for drafting me to play 3 roles in his wonderful Lone Ranger parody when another actor had to drop out. I remember the subject line of his email to me was "Cue the Understudy". You can imagine my delight when I was the character assigned to say, "*Who was that masked man?*" which was one of my favorite lines of all times.

I love being part of this wonderful group of people who love to laugh and have fun. I have made so many wonderful friends in this group, and the list continues to grow. I have had the honor of recreating roles played by Lucille Ball, Fannie Brice, Peg Lynch, Tallulah Bankhead, Marian Jordan, and so many more titans of OTR.

When I was honored with the Cawelti Award in 2019, I did not feel completely worthy of the award. I have had too much fun participating in our recreations. It didn't seem right to be getting such an honor for that work! I am grateful that the pandemic gave me an opportunity to redeem myself by pushing us to meet over Zoom. What a boon that has been!

I have been a professional stage actor in the Washington, D.C. area for decades and have had some wonderful experiences. In fact it was in theater that I initially met Jack French. He was in a production of *The Marriage of Bette and Boo* playing a priest who channeled coffee perking and bacon sizzling on a grill. We later performed in a training video for the Department of Agriculture that won an award. I had no clue to how multi-faceted his gifts are!

Well, I have yammered on for quite a while, so good talking with you Fred, and I will sign off now. I promise that if you have enjoyed this offering, I will continue to reveal my somewhat unusual past in subsequent issues of GRTR. I am delighted that you have placed the steering of the club in my hands. I will endeavor to be worthy of that trust. There is lots to do. We are at a crossroads, but we will go on.



FROM THE GRTR ARCHIVES

We still have time before network commercial break. Continuing with our theme of theater life, Beverly, our studio manager, will read an entry from a GRTR broadcast from July 24, 2018:

BEVERLY:

Radio drama is good and in great demand, and it's done with script in hand.

"First Nighter" is a radio celebration of anticipation; the intro usually takes a full two minutes, with superb SFX of big-city traffic while the narrator hails a cab and tells us about the play we're going to see.

John Dunning gives "The First Nighter Program" a good write-up, a page and a-half (*On the Air* 252-254) It is well-placed, too; people will find it exactly after they read Dunning's 8-page history of "Fibber McGee and Molly." He gives good details about the networks and "First Nighter's" different timeslots over the years,

from the mid-1930s until 1953. The early sponsor was Campana lotion; later, Miller High Life.

The stories are great, and some are backstage glimpses about the world of theater itself. The theater life is in the introduction: amidst the traffic noise and sidewalk chatter, we might hear, "There's Van Johnson!" or "Is that Betty Grable?" The usher announces "tickets," and reminds the audience of "curtain" between acts.

Dunning describes the show as "upbeat and nonviolent," and that freelance writers wrote original scripts. It's not, however, all hearts and flowers. The stories from the post-war years are hard-bitten and full of regret and thwarted ambition. One story ("Help Wanted Female" 1/8/48) is about a con man (William Conrad) who hires a woman to manage a direct-mailing campaign to raise money for children in Europe. She tips off the police and the man's shell distribution companies fall apart. It's a grim take on post-war relief efforts.

Another strong woman character wants to break into publishing; but runs into "...well aren't you pretty..." at every interview. She takes a man's name and writes Western stories, and they become a hit. She tells the papers, "...well I was just writing the stories my grandpa told me..." The old man is thrilled and says that he is happy now that we have "A Writer in the Family." 1/29/48.

The story with a true backstage flavor is "Old Lady Shakespeare" (6/17/48). It involves an actress whose career had faded with her years. She plans a comeback, finances it herself, and knows just the right part in "Romeo and Juliet." It brings to mind this catchphrase from the theater to wit: "...don't hang around here 'til you have to play The Nurse..."

An early script, from October 1939, is gentle, poignant, and complex. The owner of an Italian restaurant narrates; a young couple are his listeners. It's called "Symphony with Your Spaghetti" and the subject is an elderly lady who comes in every night to listen to the symphony hour on radio.

The woman had been a violin prodigy and had dreams of playing in a symphony orchestra. Her tutor, all those years ago, had evil intentions and kept her on a schedule of solo appearances, lucrative for himself only. The lady ran away from her manager's influence and indeed from music altogether. Her chance of playing in an orchestra was gone, but she derived great pleasure from a quiet supper in a side street café, listening to her favorite kind of music.

These are strong stories, indeed. "First Nighter" presented thoughtful and topical ideas for people living and making their way during the war years, and evidently the doubtful years beyond, as well.

MUSIC BRIDGE AND COMMERCIAL

Ishmael Reed, the elder statesman of Oakland California, recently got a nice write-up in *The New Yorker*. Fred is piping in one of his long-ago lyrics set up in old jazz style by Kip Hanrahan, "The Wardrobe Master of Paradise." "...disarmingly humorous, adept at the vernacular.... biting..."

Fade, to news of our sponsor The Dayton Dragons. They're doing OK! Keeping pace, a few games over .500. The parent club Cincinnati Reds sends players from the Bigs to Class A to rest up, hone their skills, be ready. The front office continues with Hometown Heroes introduced pre-game at home plate, and the Dragons Kids Club which keeps the spirit of teamwork, at home and school.

TALKING WITH FRANK MORGAN

Frank lives just outside Philadelphia, and has enjoyed his years in the Club, contributing in several ways. In the days of our meetings in Arlington, and lately, on ZOOM he often presents the Quiz or a First Fifteen. Fred has gotten us a good, clear phone line, so we can have a good talk with Frank.

GRTR:

Thanks, Fred, for the phone. Frank, are you on the line?

Frank:

Yes, I'm on the line.

GRTR:

In the notes you sent me, you mentioned Stan Freberg and his *When Radio Was* show; that's an off-beat way to get introduced to OTR, wouldn't you say?

Frank:

Well, he was very engaging; it was on my car radio, and it fit in with my radio electronics interest because I heard his show on a weak "sundown AM station," the kind that had to go off the air so the high-wattage boomers could take over the airwaves.

GRTR:

And after that, you began collecting OTR shows?

Frank:

Yes, I found numerous cassette collections, and today I own thousands! I would need years and years to listen to them all! Sometimes I play them as "white noise" on my computer all day at work! I have lots of OTR books, as well.

GRTR:

You know, I attended the FOTR convention in Newark only once, and I had a great time, wrote it up, in fact. Did you latch onto that same fascination with the Newark phenomenon?

Frank:

Yes! I attended the last few conventions. Wish I'd known about them sooner! A fond memory was when I cornered Shirley Mitchell at one, when she had just finished reading in a re-creation.

GRTR:

That's great! I don't recognize the name; tell us about her.

Frank:

Oh my! She's one of my all-time favorites! Most people know Shirley Mitchell as the syrupy-voiced Southern widow Leila Ransom. She was the neighbor, sometimes girlfriend, and one-time fiancé of the Great Gildersleeve. She also played Alice Darling, a boy-happy, war-plant worker who boarded with Fibber Magee and Molly. Not only that, mind you, she appeared in many dramatic shows including *Yours Truly*, *Johnny Dollar*.

GRTR:

That's impressive, those hallway encounters at the Convention. Any other recollections of the long-gone FOTR Newark?

Frank:

Well, I always enjoyed the Q & A sessions with the guest stars, and the well-researched presentations on OTR topics; and the script-readings. I purchased a few FOTR Convention video tapes, as well.

GRTR:

You picked up a lot of knowledge along the way, for sure. How can you connect that to your MWOTRC participation?

Frank:

You can take this for what it's worth. As much as I enjoy driving, getting to the DC Virginia outskirts on a Friday afternoon/evening

from West Chester, just outside Philadelphia, was not the most pleasant of drives, especially when turning around later on to drive home! That prospect didn't give me much time to talk with other Club members. That's why I enjoyed attending the off-peak hours of the Luncheons.

GRTR:

I attended precious few of those luncheons. Tell me about what was special?

Frank:

I do admit to enjoying OTR trivia. It was especially fun at the luncheons when you're competing with members whose knowledge far exceeds my own. That was the luncheons, and I did actually win a few Luncheon Quizzes.

GRTR:

That's what I heard, you rascal!

Frank:

What can I say? Now I contribute quiz questions for our current ZOOM meetings. I'm so happy now that Jack allows me the chance to compose quizzes for our ZOOM meetings. I'll read or hear something that gives me an idea for a Quiz, and I'm off and running.

GRTR:

Very good! I can't wait for "Julius LaRosa" to be a quiz answer!

Frank:

Well, my primary goals are to make the Quiz fun, to pass along a little OTR information if I can fit it in, not make it so difficult. Who would stick around if I asked about "15th Century

Austrian Furniture Makers,” the way they do on Jeopardy? Pretty soon I’ll ask a question about Shirley Mitchell, right?

GRTR:

Point taken! Now I must say, I’m fascinated about your notes about the technology of radio wave transmission, from the old days.

Frank:

You’re right about those distant stations. I would always search for baseball, and could get New York, Cincinnati, Chicago, St. Louis, and Boston. I once made a “radio wave band trap,” which I found in *Popular Science* magazine.

GRTR:

Pretty neat! I bet Phil Kania and Jim Widner among others would be interested to hear about it.

Frank:

Well, sure. It was really just a very, very sensitive fine tuner to help separate the signals. It worked pretty well. I kept a list of all the station call letters that I came upon. Of course now with satellite radio I can pull in stations from wherever I like. Yeah, I know, it’s the instant idea of getting anything/anytime. But it kind of takes away the fun of searching out the signals.

GRTR:

I know, Frank. It’s the lament of the progress of technology. So, on to other aspects of your life. You run, as a serious distance runner, right?

Frank:

Yes, I really go for it, I guess. I enjoy a run most mornings. It’s the emotional lift I like. And on most mornings, I find some quiet time

after my run, 45–minutes before work when I can sit in my car and quietly read a book. I always have two or three books going, *Devil in the White City* is a current favorite.

GRTR:

Vacation–time running, including Marathons, no less? You mentioned in your notes?

Frank:

Yes, in fact my best personal time was in the Steamtown Marathon, outside Scranton Pennsylvania. It finishes at the local railroad museum devoted to steam locomotives. My time there qualified me for the Boston Marathon, which I ran in the year 2000.

GRTR:

Pretty cool, you're staying fit as a fiddle! Other cities?

Frank:

Yes, in fact. On an excursion I took years ago, I ran a Marathon in Edinburgh, Scotland in support of breast cancer research. It began at 11 PM on the solstice. All of the city, including Edinburgh Castle, was bathed in pink light.

GRTR: And on the streets of Paris?



Frank:

That was great, too; early morning when the sun was barely up; from my hotel around to the Louvre and the Jardin des Tuileries and along the Seine and back to my hotel. The beauty of the gardens and the sun glistening off the gold of the rooftops, steeples; and the bridges crossing the Seine, were breathtaking. It was so beautiful it inspired me to slim down over the coming months, because all the cookies and ice cream I had eaten to that point had me competing to be a stunt double for Porky Pig!

GRTR:

Insightful, for sure, Frank. Right now Beverly is tapping her pencil on her clipboard because we're closing in on network feed. Got one more anecdote for us?

Frank:

For sure. In 1996 my first marathon was the annual Marine Corps Marathon. It was also the most emotional time of all that I've run, but not because it was an accomplishment for myself. There is an incline as you approach the Finish Line in the Arlington Cemetery. There were wheelchair participants going up that incline, struggling to go forward inches at a time. We could see that it was their accomplishment, so not one of us would dare touch a wheelchair. What we did was shout encouragement as we ran by. Amazing.

GRTR:

Thanks, Frank, a truly great story, nice way to wrap up.

MUSIC TO NETWORK FEED

Beverly is signaling us to network feed. Peaceful thoughts to carry us on through troubled times. From the GRTR Archives, 2019, a Baroque treat:

JOYCE DiDONATO'S CONCEPT ALBUM

Fred is piping in an aria from Handel: Queen Boadicea, a warrior of Britain sings a lament: "Oh lead me to some peaceful gloom..."

The 2016 album is called "In War and Peace". The subtitle is "Harmony Through Music," and in the liner notes Joyce DiDonato asks a question for the troubled age we are living in:

In the midst of chaos, how do you find peace?

She prints the answers from people in all walks of life. All are excellent; this is exceptional:

"As our hands rise, we view unprotected people in chaos and find our peace in being models of brokenness made strong in the darkness and the burning light."

Her own brilliant answer is to look at works of opera written in the Baroque era, because those composers took "reinvented antiquity" and wrote beautiful music about tragic events, as a path to transcendence in the minds of their listeners.

DiDonato is in full voice, backed by a chamber orchestra, as she sings arias by Handel, Purcell, and Monteverdi. There are seven arias of blood, revenge, death: and eight arias of safe haven, meadows, birds, lovers, and sturdy oaks. Words to live by in these unsettling times.

Signing off to network feed. Thanks to all for tuning in; keep those cards and letters coming! Soup and sandwiches this afternoon? We'll manage!

Thanks ever,

Mark Anderson

Frederick MD