

The Whistler (Article)

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“...I know many things, for I walk by night...”

The Whistler, one of radio’s classic mystery anthologies, continues even today to entertain legions of fans—and when you think about it, it’s an impressive feat for a show that spent most of its thirteen-year run (May 16, 1942-July 31, 1955) heard by only one-half of the United States. A staple of CBS’ West Coast network (it was often trumpeted in the show’s opening as “rated tops in popularity for a longer period of time than any other West Coast program”) and sponsored regionally by Signal Oil, it appeared only on the East Coast in two separate runs: as a 1946 summer replacement for Campbell Soups’ **The Jack Carson Show** and from March 26, 1947-September 29, 1948 for Household Finance.

The series had one of radio’s best-known crime drama formats, similar to **The Shadow** (in its early 1930s incarnation) and **The Mysterious Traveler**. Each week, a mysterious individual known as “The Whistler” would narrate a tale in which an everyday, average Joe would end up committing murder—as [Radio Crime Fighters](#)’ Jim Cox puts it, “suddenly caught in a destructive web of [his] own misdeeds.” Technically, **The Whistler** wasn’t really a *mystery* series—the identity and guilt of the killer was never in doubt, but the focus of the show’s stories was to demonstrate just how the evildoer had tripped himself up: and they *always* did, overlooking that one teensy detail that would be revealed as “the strange ending to tonight’s story.”



In the program’s early seasons, the Whistler played a more significant role in the dramas than just casual observer—he took a more active part, playing “Conscience” to the killer and goading him to his eventual doom. At the conclusion of the show, he would let loose with a Shadow-like laugh, informing listeners in a few brief lines what had sealed the murderer’s fate. Among the actors to play the omnipresent man of mystery were Joseph Kearns and Gale Gordon in the show’s early seasons; later, the part was played by Everett Clarke (in a 1947 Chicago series) and Bill Johnstone (the 1947-48 full network version). But throughout the show’s run, the Whistler was mostly essayed by Bill Forman, a popular announcer from programs like **The Phil Harris-Alice Faye Show** and **Father Knows Best**. Forman would be the only actor to receive credit for the role, and even that didn’t happen until

November 1951; the actor commented after this hard-fought victory: “I’m proud to be ‘The Whistler’ and I wanted people to know it.” (Marvin Miller, a one-time **Whistler** announcer, also played the title part briefly when Forman was in the service.)

I’ve been a huge fan of **The Whistler** for many years now; partly because it’s a superb program that entertains in spite of not having the big-time guest star wattage of anthologies like **Suspense**. The series employed the cream of the crop of actors from Hollywood’s Radio Row: Elliott & Cathy Lewis, Betty Lou Gerson, Wally Maher, Hans Conried, Gerald Mohr, and Lurene Tuttle, to name only a few. These performers appeared so often on the show that they were dubbed “Whistler’s children.”

The Whistler also featured one of Golden Age Radio’s classic openings: a haunting 13-note theme created by Wilbur Hatch (who also composed the show’s eerie mood music). Hatch estimated that only one person in twenty could whistle this exact melody, and for the show’s thirteen-year duration one person pretty much did—a young woman named Dorothy Roberts. In fact, during the war years, Roberts had to get permission from Lockheed (where she worked) to leave her factory job in order to make it to the program and “whistle” every week.

I listened to a pair of **Whistler** programs last night while at work, the first being what John Dunning calls a “classic example” of the series: “Brief Pause For Murder” (as heard September 11, 1949). KTUX announcer Roger Wickson (Frank Nelson, and he’s great in a dramatic change-of-pace role) is in head-over-heels *loathe* with his wife Tisha (Mary Lansing), and he plots to dispatch her to the happy hunting ground by means of a most ingenious plan; he enlists the help of station engineer Vern Cummings (William Conrad) to prerecord his 10 p.m. station break (making certain the chief of police has tuned in) and while that plays, he will be a-strangling his wife. (I’m sure you can see where this is headed, but I’m not going to spoil it for you.) This script was co-written by Bill Forman, by the way.

Conrad also appears on the second show, “Blue Alibi” (5/14/50), as a racketeer who arranges for his buddies to land lucrative construction contracts for city projects by paying kickback money to city treasurer John Sheridan (Willard Waterman). The problems begin when Sheridan’s wife Edith (Lansing) finds out about her spouse’s dirty deals and threatens to go to the District Attorney with the info. There’s an amusing moment during one of this program’s commercials—an announcement of a \$10,000 Signal Oil contest reveals that among the prizes are five aluminum makeup cases provided by—I swear I’m not making this up—a luggage company called “Halliburton.” (Let’s see—a plot involving “lucrative construction contracts” and *Halliburton* gets mentioned—Nostradamus, call your office...)

The impact of **The Whistler**—despite its limited West Coast status—was so tremendous that Columbia Pictures released a successful series of B-pictures (ten in all) beginning with [The Whistler](#) in 1944. (The films were shown on the Encore Mystery channel from time to time, and they were pretty entertaining, despite their B-status.) Jack Benny also used the show for inspiration in several of his broadcasts playing a character called “The Fiddler”; most notably a program from October 20, 1946 in which real-life **Whistler** Bill Forman makes an appearance. Of the 691 shows originally broadcast, nearly 500 programs are extant today, entertaining a new generation of OTR fans. I *heartily* recommend **The Whistler** to both novice and

experienced listeners, “because even when you know who’s guilty, you always receive a startling surprise at the final curtain.”