

# Old Time Radio's Top Ten

OTR's Ten Best Personalities

By Bill Russo

Lake Worth, South Florida, USA

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## With thanks...

to my friends and the instructors at Boston's, Grahm Junior College in Kenmore Square, where I studied broadcasting, Red Sox baseball, riding on the MTA, and the art of strolling through Boston Common at lunchtime.

A special thanks to the custodian who knew more about jazz than Benny Goodman, for introducing me to new music, including that of a beautiful lady from Newark, Gloria Lynn, who produced the iconic vocal, "I Wish You Love" in the summer of 1964.

## Radio Quotes

Radio, which was a much better medium than television will ever be, was easy and pleasant to listen to. Your mind filled automatically with images. (TV host, Dick Cavett)

Radio is the most intimate and socially personal medium in the world. (Harry Von Zell, announcer for George Burns and Gracie Allen)

Radio is the theater of the mind; television is the theater of the mindless. (Steve Allen, first host of the "Tonight Show").

Basically, radio hasn't changed over the years. Despite all the technical improvements, it still boils down to a man or a woman and a microphone, playing music, sharing stories, talking about issues - communicating with an audience. (Casey Kasem, Iconic Radio DeeJay)

Those of us who grew up on Radio, came to look upon it as a great friend. It put us to sleep at night while listening to the Whistler, and it woke us up in the morning. On snowy winter days it informed us when school was going to be cancelled, leading to a great gathering on the hill with friends, for sledding. It even gave us good wishes on our birthday. Facebook does that now, but I still prefer the warmth of glowing tubes. They were far brighter and more personal than the unending streams of Twits, Tweets, and Views from Facebook and similar sites. (Bill Russo, writer and former Disc Jockey)

## Foreword

The title of this book is Old Radio's Top Ten, but it's actually just a list of the performers that I consider to be the best of old time radio. There was no poll of thousands of Facebookers leading to the selection of these artists.

So the whole thing is merely a listing of my favorite shows and artists. Yours may be entirely different. I am no more qualified than anyone else to come up with a top ten list. But, in point of fact, I do have a small set of credentials that might give me a bit more insight than many listeners.

I was almost a part of old time radio. Born in the very early 1940s, I grew up on radio and wanted to be a part of it for as long as I can remember. In Boston, I attended Graham Junior College to learn broadcasting and prepare for a radio career. But by 1965 when I landed my first radio gig, Old Time Radio was on life support.

There were a handful of live dramatic and variety shows still on the air, most notable was Arthur Godfrey whose daily program defied time by running right up into the mid 1970s. For most people however, radio jobs were restricted to being a disc jockey or a newsman. I tried my hand at both, with moderate success.

Though I never got to be a part of old time radio, I did have a job at an NBC affiliate and got to run the control board while the network show was running. I did the station breaks and local commercials. When working at a radio station that was part of the Mutual Radio Network, I was sometimes asked to do reports of stories from my area over the full network. Each time I did a report that was broadcast to over 500 stations all over the United States, I was thrilled and excited, because I was sure that Walter Cronkite or some big executive from radio or TV was going to call me and offer me a national job. That never happened!

So, those are my credentials for coming up with a top ten list. I was an avid listener to the last days of old time radio, and I was a minor part of it. Here then, in this little book, are my picks for the best radio performers.

## The top ten performers of old time radio

Radio used to be just like television - except that it delivered a higher quality picture.

Indeed, the images transmitted by radio were in HD and 3D long before TV could even dream of the technology.

To the people who lived during the golden age of radio this is absolutely true. And to anyone of any age, who has ever listened to a thrilling 'Lights Out' episode on a windy, 'rain smashing into the window panes night'; it is a sure bet that 'the unseen' can frighten you as much, or more, than 'the seen'.

Radio was called "The Theater of the Mind" and during its greatest years (from around 1939 to 1962), it delivered the greatest theater ever.

To come up with a top ten list of the greatest radio actors, I consulted only my memories of more than 60 years of listening to dramatic radio: first live as it happened and later on tapes and CDs & Old Time Radio rebroadcasts.

## THE TOP TEN RADIO GREATS

## 10. Harold Peary.

You might not be familiar with his real name, but almost everyone has heard of “The Great Gildersleeve”.

Peary played the role on NBC’s Fibber McGee and Molly show to such great popularity, that he was given broadcasting’s first spin off series. In 1941 Gildersleeve premiered on NBC radio and lasted all the way up through 1957.

Gildy was played by Peary until 1950 when he left NBC and the show in favor of CBS radio. He was replaced by a sound-alike named Willard Waterman. Waterman was good, but Peary was better. He created the role and fleshed out Gildersleeve from a few lines of script. Peary’s laugh and exasperated cries of ‘ooooo Leroy!’ were radio classics that could not be scripted.



Hal Peary first appeared as “Gildy” on the top-rated Fibber McGee and Molly series in the 1930s. His character was so popular that it became the first “Spin-off” in broadcasting history. Gildy was moved to the fictional town of Summerfield where he was water commissioner and guardian of his niece Margery and a clever little boy named Leroy. The show ran into the late 1950s but Hal Peary switched networks in 1950 and the sponsor would not let him take the show to the new network. The producers hired a new actor to play the Gildersleeve part. Ironically, Willard Waterman, sounded almost exactly like Peary. If you ever get a chance to hear programs by both actors, you’ll be amazed at the similarity. The only difference that you will notice is the laugh! Hal Peary had a long, distinct laugh. Waterman said that the laugh belonged to Peary and he was not going to copy it. In the late 1950s, the show moved briefly to television, but it had nowhere near the success that it enjoyed on radio.

## 9. Brace Beemer.

Another name you may not know: but his air name is among radio's most famous. He was The Lone Ranger. For 13 years Brace gave voice to the masked man.

He looked the part. He played the part. He lived the part.

Beemer would regularly put on his white hat and outfit - complete with spurs and the 'Great Horse Silver' - and visit nursing homes, orphanages, schools and hospitals. Ron Lackman, in his book 'Same Time Same Station' said that Brace Beemer did it all without publicity and without compensation.

The Lone Ranger roamed the Kilocycles from 1933 to 1955. There were a few other actors before Beemer took on the role in 1941, but he put his stamp on it like no one else. He rode the show all the way up to the last live program in 1954. The network ran repeats in 1955 and then gave up on the radio version as the TV show took over. Another great actor, Clayton Moore, became the man behind the mask.



For many years Brace Beemer, at his own expense, made personal appearances at charity events and in hospitals. He truly tried to live up to the wholesome character envisioned by the producers of the program. The series was created in Detroit at WXYZ by George W. Trendle. He also produced two other famous radio shows, The Green Hornet and Sergeant Preston of the Mounties. All three of his programs made it to the last gasp of old time radio. All three also proved successful in their television runs.



## 8. George Burns & Gracie Allen.

George and Gracie enter the eight spot in tandem because during her lifetime, she and George were as close as shakers of salt and pepper. They always worked together, and you really could not use one without the other.

Gracie would hit 60 laugh home runs every single show, but she could not have done it without the skilled pitching of George; who always knew where to throw a line so Gracie could nail it.

Burns and Allen were at times on NBC and also had several seasons on CBS. No matter which network, the show ran without interruption from 1935 to 1950, when it migrated to television.



George and Gracie were stars in every medium. They slid easily into radio from Vaudeville and then to television. After Gracie passed away George had a huge hit record "I Wish I was 18 Again", and had several top grossing movies. His specialty was, playing "GOD".

## 7. Jack Benny.

Jack's show ran on various networks from 1933 to 1955, For many years the Benny show was number one and indeed Jack may have been the most popular performer of the Golden Age.

His show was one of the first ensemble sit-coms. Like Seinfeld, Jack did not always deliver the big lines or the funny lines. A zany cast of characters paraded by Jack during each show, much in the same way Kramer, Newman, George and Elaine bounced their material off Jerry.

For several years Jack did both radio and TV, but somewhere around 1953 he decided not to make any more radio programs, so for two years the network ran only re-runs: and the re runs often scored a number one rating.



Jack was the first comedian to let his cast have all the best lines, and to allow his character to be topped by every other player, especially his wise-cracking valet, Rochester. This technique was copied to perfection in the nine seasons of Seinfeld, where Jerry, much like Jack, was always upstaged by Kramer, George, Newman, and Elaine.

The cast, from the left. Dennis Day leaning on the radio. Eddie (Rochester) Anderson. Phil Harris, singer and bandleader who had a best-selling record entitled "The Thing". Mary Livingston (Mrs. Benny). Don Wilson, the announcer. Mel Blanc, the man of a thousand voices who played many parts on the Jack Benny show including Jack's Maxwell car, the bear who guarded Jack's money vault, and Professor LeBlanc, Jack's befuddled violin teacher. LeBlanc, Jack's befuddled violin teacher.

## 6. Basil Rathbone:

He was the ultimate Sherlock Holmes on the silver screen and also on the Silvertone Radio, from Sears and Roebuck. Rathbone and Nigel Bruce as Dr. Watson made only 14 films, but acted in over 200 Sherlock Holmes radio stories between 1939 and 1946 on NBC and later the Mutual Broadcasting System.

The writing was based on names and incidents suggested by Conan Doyle's original stories, and was done expertly by Dennis Green and Anthony Boucher. There were occasional contributions from Leslie Charteris, who was the author of the hit chain of novels (also a radio & tv series) featuring "The Saint".

Unhappily for fans of 221B, Rathbone tired of the radio series in 1946 and quit, even though he was offered a huge amount of money if he would continue. Nigel Bruce did not want to quit, so he partnered with Tom Conway and the New, New Adventures of Sherlock Holmes aired in 1947. Conway did a fine job and Nigel Bruce was, as always, Nigel Bruce...but the ratings were nowhere near what they were with Rathbone, so the show was dropped from the 1948 schedule.

Almost all of the Rathbone-Bruce radio adventures are available cheaply and in excellent quality. Many are available to listen to and download for free at the Internet Archives Old Radio section.



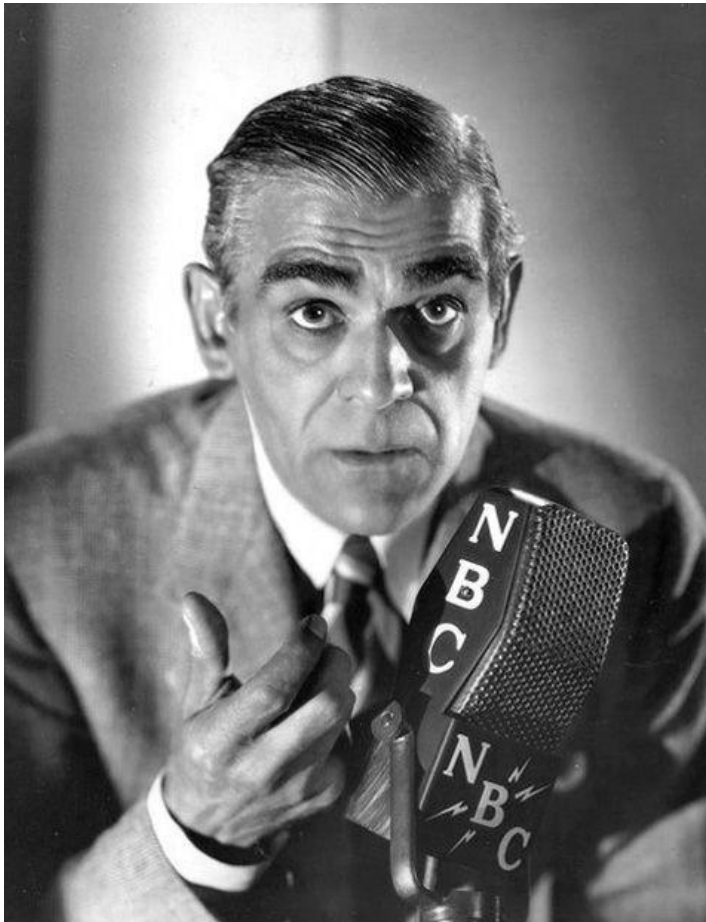
Even today, after dozens of others have played the roles, Rathbone and Bruce are considered by many people to be the real Holmes and Watson.

## 5. Boris Karloff:

Boris did quite a bit of radio, but takes the number five rating based on just one single performance...."The Cat Wife".

This is a must listen episode of Arch Obler's "Lights Out". Karloff plays a hardworking cuckold with a horrid wife. She transforms into an unearthly 'horror' after she argues with Boris when he comes home to find her partying with her drunken, rowdy friends.

This episode is freely available on the internet. Do a bit of searching on the old time radio sites and you will find it. The performances of Karloff and the woman who plays his shrew wife are among the most compelling in all of old time radio.



#### 4. Brett Morrison:

He played “The Shadow” longer than any of the several actors who had a crack at impersonating 'the man about town who learned the secret of invisibility in the Orient'.

As a person who could not be seen, The Shadow was the most perfect radio character ever. Morrison played him well, from 1943 to 1956 - with time out in the middle for the Second World War. A renaissance man in real life, Morrison had the air of one who actually could learn secret stuff in the Orient and bring it home to the States.



**Brett Morrison with Grace Mathews who played Margo Lane**

### 3. Orson Welles:

Orson Welles also played the Shadow. He had the role for the 1938 and 1939 seasons. He was a brash 22 year old boy genius who was juggling his "Shadow" role with a little acting troupe he had on Broadway called the 'Mercury Theater'.

On broadcast days, Welles would be taxied from his Broadway performance to the radio studio. He would storm in at the last second, and pick up his script just minutes before the show was scheduled to begin. Without rehearsal or even reading through the script, he would give a masterful performance every single time.

His Margot Lane, Agnes Moorhead, once told of a particularly good episode. She said that Welles was being his usual booming self, reading his lines with authority and chasing bad guys around the radio stage.

During the middle commercial halfway through the show, Welles stage whispered to Moorhead, "Hey Agnes, this is a pretty good show. I wonder how it turns out!"

In addition to his Shadow work Welles had a few other series. From London for the BBC, he did a program called Harry Lime...it was a prequel to "The Third Man". Most of Welles radio work was good. Some of it was spectacular.

For the Mercury Theater and also for Suspense, Welles did "The Hitch hiker". It's a chilling story of a 1939 road trip from New York to California with Welles driving and death following him.

His biggest contribution to radio, of course, was "The War of the Worlds". It's probably the most famous radio show in history and should be listened to every year or two - much like Citizen Kane needs to be viewed every couple of years.



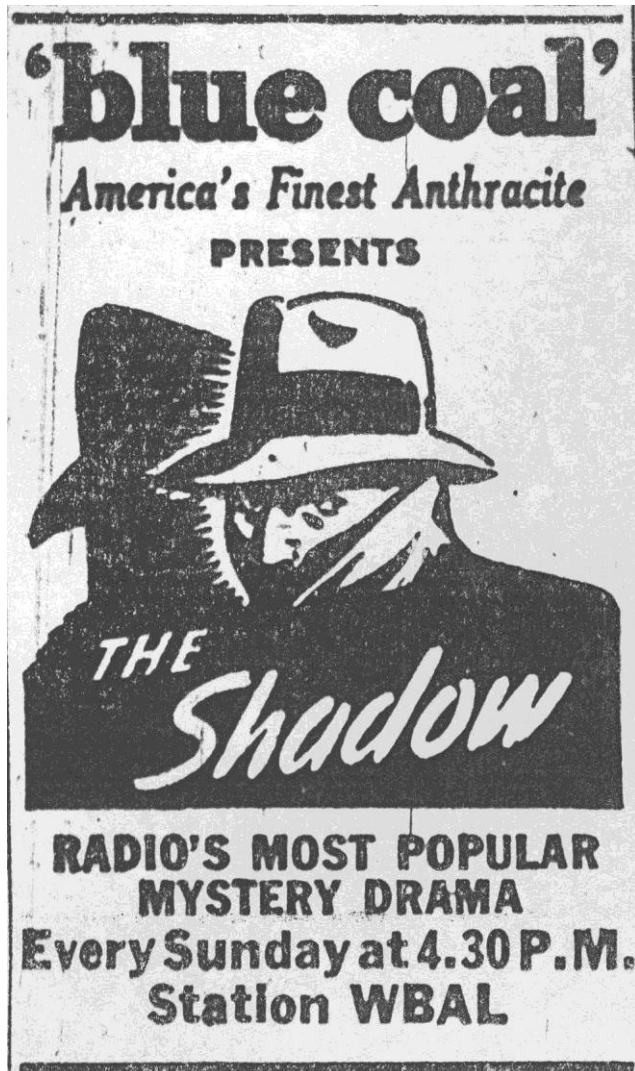
It's difficult now to remember how big a personality Orson Wells was. We're closing in on a full century since the 'Boy Genius' first came to the attention of the world. It's hard to believe, but almost before he was old enough to vote, he formed his own Broadway Theater company, the Mercury Players. Shortly after that he landed the plum role of "The Shadow". He played the part to perfection for one full season, plus a summer series for Goodrich Tires.

His longtime friend and co-worker in the Mercury Theater, Agnes Moorhead was fond of telling stories of the Shadow days. She said that many nights Orson would be working late in the Mercury Theater and he would continue almost right up until airtime. Then he would hire an ambulance which would scream its way through the streets of New York City and deposit him at the radio network just seconds before airtime.

She said that Orson would pick up his script without even looking at it and deliver a spectacular performance with a completely cold reading.



"One night", she said, "we were halfway through show. It was live before a studio audience. We were on stage during the commercial break. The announcer was reading a spot for our sponsor, Blue Coal, and Orson staged whispered to me. 'Hey Aggie, this is a great story. I wonder how it ends.'"



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