

THE PHIL HARRIS-ALICE FAYE SHOW

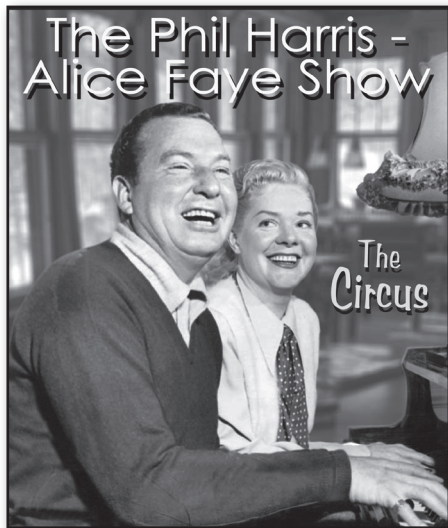
The Circus

Program Guide by Elizabeth McLeod

Performing talent is only part of what it took to be a successful comedy star in the Golden Age of Radio. You could have an instinctive grasp on how to deliver a funny line -- but if you didn't have that funny line to begin with, you weren't going to get your laugh. To stand out from all of the yuk-yukking funsters crowding the microphones in the 1940s, you needed good material. And to create that material, you needed good writers. Few programs made better use of great comedy material than *The Phil Harris-Alice Faye Show*. Sharp and edgy, sarcastic and subversive, the Harris-Faye show burst through the complacent lazy gagging of most postwar comedy to create a style of humor that was as innovative as it was aggressive. Even today, in a world of cold, jaded, detached comedy, the Harris-Faye show retains a startling freshness that belies its age.

Certainly, the performances of the program's cast contributed mightily to the popularity of the series, and remain a significant part of the show's appeal to modern fans. Phil and Alice played preposterous exaggerations of themselves, and did so with such skill that you'll forget that they're acting. Elliott Lewis, a man of immense protean talents, vanished completely into the drunken wastrelsy of the "Frankie Remley" character. Walter Tetley so convincingly portrayed a mouthy and malevolent teenage boy that you'll find yourself unwilling

to accept the reality that he was, in fact, a thirty-five year old man. The skills of these fine actors were, without a doubt, essential to the program's success.



And yet, the fact remains that Phil Harris, Alice Faye, Elliott Lewis, and Walter Tetley were not, strictly speaking, comedians. Phil Harris began his show business career as a musician, became a singing bandleader, and matured into a "personality" -- the sort of likeable all-around entertainer who could command attention on a stage (or at a microphone) by sheer force of his personal charisma. Alice Faye was a movie star, in a time when those words had a distinct and specific



Alice Faye

meaning. Her picture showed up on the cover of *Photoplay*, *Screen Romances*, and *Motion Picture World*. She got top billing in lavish Technicolor spectaculars, and she wafted about prewar Hollywood in a perfumed cloud of untouchable glamour. Elliott Lewis was a jobbing radio actor, the kind of performer who could credibly perform any kind of role in any kind of program, whether wildly funny or deadly serious. To type him as a comic actor is to shove him into a box far too small to contain his talent. And Walter Tetley was a child impersonator -- a grown man whose never-changing voice kept him in short-pantsed roles his entire adult life. Fine performers, all -- but none of them could be called a career comedian. They could deliver the funny lines -- as long as they had the funny

lines in hand. The performers were only half the reason for the success of *The Phil Harris-Alice Faye Show*. The other half rolled out of the typewriters of two of radio's most vigorous comedy writers: Ray Singer and Dick Chevillait. Ray and Dick were a pair of smart-mouthed New Yorkers who drifted into Hollywood in the early 1940s looking for trouble and employment...and usually managed to find both. Ray Singer first turned up on the comedy scene in the late 1930s as an impudent young man with a taste for the seamy, disreputable world of nightclub comedy. Lacking any particular gifts as a performer, Singer carved out a niche -- with a rusty knife -- selling broad and racy gags to comics who knew they weren't performing for family audiences and took every opportunity to prove it. Among the comics who enjoyed Singer's edgy humor was Milton Berle, who was sufficiently impressed with the young writer to bring him along for one of his many short-lived radio series of the time. Singer learned to moderate his style to suit the more parlor-bound demands of the radio audience, and in doing so established himself as a reliable, efficient gagwriter.

Dick Chevillait was a decade older than Ray Singer, and his sense of humor tended less to the blue than to the peculiar. He found his way into show business as a smalltime actor. While working with a stock company in Rochester, New York, he began dabbling in writing, turning out comedy scripts on spec for station WHAM. The station wasn't all that impressed with his work, but Jack Benny happened to pass through town one night in 1932. The comedian thought enough of a Chevillait script that he invited the actor-turned-writer to move to New York and contribute gags to his program. Benny's imprimatur led Chevillait to jobs providing material to various other comics of the day, landing a job with Rudy Vallee's show in 1940. The producer of that program, Dick Mack, appreciated Chevillait's absurdist outlook. When Ray Singer blew into town in 1941, Mack found him a perfect writing partner: Chevillait. Individually, they were odd nonconformists bending themselves to fit the necessary mold. Together, they became a force.

The first great accomplishment of the Singer-Chevillat team was the transformation of John Barrymore from a washed-up, alcoholic Broadway has-been to The Comedy Find of 1942. Chevillat's mordant wit and Singer's taste for the tasteless went where no other writers would have dared in turning Barrymore's dissipation into an elaborate running gag. Audiences, to the astonishment of the critics, the ad agency, the network, and Vallee himself, lapped it up. Here was the greatest Shakespearean actor of his generation, deprecating himself in every possibly way every Thursday night, and throwing himself as whole-souled into the role as he had the role of Hamlet in his long-lost prime.



John Barrymore

Barrymore's sudden, but not altogether unanticipated death, brought an end to that particular phase of the Singer-Chevillat partnership (and Vallee's entry into the Coast Guard brought an end to the program itself). However, Dick Mack carried on with the same sponsor, using a new format that featured the unlikely pairing of knockabout comedienne Joan Davis and simpy musical-comedy star Jack Haley. And he kept Singer and Chevillat on board as writers for the new series. *The Sealtest Village Store* was a sometimes uneasy blending of Vallee's old musical-variety format with a rural-themed situation comedy. It carried enough of the Thursday night audience to make it through the war years, though, and Singer and Chevillat used the program as a laboratory to test their own ideas of what a situation comedy ought to sound like. By the end of its run in 1946, *Village Store* was developing a distinctive comic edge all its own.

Meanwhile, Phil Harris and Alice Faye were plugging along through the first season of their own situation comedy under the aegis of *The Fitch Bandwagon*. Harris's long-established persona as Jack Benny's irresponsible goofball bandleader seemed tailor-made for a solo series -- and with wife Alice just then fed up with moviemaking and looking to scale back her professional activities, a joint radio show for the couple made sense to all involved. Writers Joe Connelly and Bob Mosher devised a straightforward "family sitcom" format for the couple, not far removed from the successful *Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*. As that first season wore on, however, it became evident that the "Phil Harris Character" (as established on the Benny series), didn't quite work as a dad. Audiences found it difficult to like a hard-drinking carouser when he was presented as the father of two young children. Anticipating this problem, Connelly and Mosher established the character of "Frankie Remley" as Phil's disreputable sidekick, but their writing for the character often fell short of the level of outrageousness such a character required to really work. When the first season of the Harris-Faye Fitch program ended, Connelly and Mosher moved on to take a job with *Amos 'n' Andy*. Producer Paul Phillips found himself looking for replacement writers, and Singer and Chevillat (now dedicated to continuing their work as a team) fell seamlessly into the job.

The revamped *Fitch Bandwagon* of 1947-48 was a sharp improvement over the tentative first season, with Singer and Chevillat introducing an aggressive new tone to the comedy. With the addition of Walter Tetley as malicious grocery boy Julius Abbruzio and Robert North as Alice's prissy brother Willie -- and with a stronger emphasis on Remley's scheming and Phil's ignorance as driving character traits -- the series moved away from gentle Ozzie-and-Harriet style antics to wildly exaggerated comic plots. Critics enjoyed the new approach, Harris and Faye were happy -- but out in Indianapolis, the F. W. Fitch Company looked at the talent fees and decided it was out of its league. At the end of the season, Fitch cancelled. The Music Corporation of America, which owned the format, quickly brought the Rexall Drug Company on board to continue the show the following season.

Rexall president Justin Dart didn't corner the small-town market for antacid tablets and cough syrup with his scintillating sense of humor. He didn't enjoy Jimmy Durante and Garry Moore when his company backed their program, and he found the Harris-Faye package even less to his taste. But he was also a sharp enough businessman to realize that his own tastes weren't necessarily those of the mass audience -- and he gave the program free rein. The series was not only allowed to continue along the path Singer and Chevillat had laid out during the Fitch days, but to go even further...by relentlessly lampooning Rexall itself. With the ever-stuffy Gale Gordon bringing his pomp and temper to the role of the Rexall representative Mr. Scott, the sponsor took on a key role in the plots themselves, with the devastation wrought each week by Phil and Frankie often motivated by some desperate effort to curry favor with the company.

Singer and Chevillat imbued their scripts with the strong thread of anti-authoritarianism then manifest in popular comedy, as a generation of irritated ex-GIs felt free to express their frustration with the petty authority figures now complicating their civilian lives. Frankie, as written by Singer and Chevillat, had no respect for any person or institution that attempted to enforce their will upon him, and gladly used Phil as a pawn in actively sabotaging the mores of Responsible Society. Before anyone ever heard of James Dean, radio's Frankie Remley was postwar America's original Rebel Without A Cause, and his



Justin Dart

writers kept that trait at the forefront of his characterization. He didn't need a reason to make trouble, it was clear that he dragged Phil into a web of hopeless existential chaos every week just for the sheer joy of it. If Justin Dart had an issue with that, he kept it to himself. As a result, the 1948-49 season of *The Phil Harris-Alice Faye Show* might be the single most consistently, outrageously funny season of any radio program in the medium's history.

Ray Singer and Dick Chevillat continued to turn out material for the series at a very high level throughout the 1952-53 season. When they left the show, it withered in their absence. Subsequent writers followed the essential structure that they

had established for the characters and their relationships -- but the edge was gone, the sense of the absurd, anything-goes anarchy that characterized the Singer-Chevillat scripts at their best was just missing. The new writers, able though they might have been in other realms, could handle the words (so to speak), but not the music.



The Donna Reed Show

Singer and Chevillat left the Harris-Faye show in order to push into television, forming their own company: Raydic Corporation. They produced their own new sitcom idea, set in a boarding house full of oddball tenants. *It's A Great Life* offered echoes of the old magic in its portrayal of one of the boarders as a no-account Remley-like hustler, but something had been lost in the translation.



Green Acres

When the series was cancelled after a two season run, Singer and Chevillat dissolved their partnership in search of solo work. Singer put in several years as head writer for, of all things, *The Donna Reed Show*, a sticky-sweet concoction that the Ray Singer of 1948 would have mocked without mercy. Chevillat eventually landed the best of all possible jobs for a man of his unique sensibilities, turning up as the main writer for the most absurd of all absurdist comedies: *Green Acres*. He had an entire world of off-center nonsense to play with -- and even a resident shyster-con man, Mr. Haney, into whom he could infuse a bit of the old Remley spirit.

But whatever Ray Singer and Dick Chevillat accomplished in television, *The Phil Harris-Alice Faye Show* has to stand as their finest long-term achievement. Nothing is as evanescent as comedy, and much of what passed as top-rate laugh material for radio listeners in the 1940s comes across as embalmed and musty in the 21st century. But the craftsmanship that these two outstanding writers put into their scripts keeps their best work as alive and vital for the listeners today as it was to their parents and grandparents nearly three quarters of a century ago.

THE REXALL DRUG COMPANY
presents

PHIL HARRIS
and
ALICE FAYE

in
THE PHIL HARRIS-ALICE FAYE SHOW

Written by
RAY SINGER and DICK CHEVILLAT

Featuring
ELLIOTT LEWIS
as **Frankie Remley**

WALTER TETLEY
as **Julius Abbruzio**

ROBERT NORTH
as **Willie Faye**

JEANINE ROOS and ANNE WHITFIELD
as **Phyllis and Little Alice**

and
GALE GORDON
as
Mr. Scott

BILL FORMAN
announcing

GRIFF BARNETT
as **Your Rexall Family Druggist**

Produced and Directed by
PAUL PHILLIPS

CD 1A: “Jury Duty” - 02/20/1949

Phil is obligated to fulfill a civic duty...and to provide an unemployed Frankie Remley with temporary housing.



Phil Harris

CD 1B: “Remley is Fired” - 02/27/1949

Phil tries to get Frankie into a job and out of his guest room.

CD 2A: “Remley is Re-Hired” - 03/13/1949

Rexall puts Frankie back on the payroll...as a dishwasher.

CD 2B: “Alice’s Birthday” - 03/20/1949

Phil has a big idea about a present to give his wife.

CD 3A: “The Ski Trip” - 03/27/1949

Vacation plans go awry when Phil and Frankie lose their driver’s licenses.

CD 3B: “The Sponsor’s Daughter” - 04/03/1949

Mr. Scott’s daughter falls in love with Phil.

CD 4A: “The Circus” - 04/10/1949

A visit to the circus is not without complications.

CD 4B: “Dinner for Teacher” - 04/17/1949

To get rid of unwanted dinner guests, Phil and Frankie add some special ingredients to the food.

CD 5A: “Movie Role” - 04/24/1949

Alice decides to resume her motion picture career...with Phil along for the ride.

CD 5B: “Spring Housecleaning” - 05/01/1949

Phil and Frankie take on spring cleaning. Chaos ensues.

CD 6A: “Mother’s Day Present” - 05/08/1949

Alice’s Mother’s Day gift is hotter than Phil anticipated.

CD 6B: “Cadillac in the Swimming Pool” - 05/15/1949

Trouble begins when Phil and Frankie drive Mr. Scott’s car into a swimming pool.

CD 7A: “Phil’s Boat” - 05/22/1949

Phil buys a yacht...but has to get it back to the surface.

CD 7B: “The Picnic” - 05/29/1949

Phil and Frankie versus The Great Outdoors.

CD 8A: “The Tonsillectomy” - 06/05/1949

Phil is horrified when his tonsils must come out.

CD 8B: “The French Orphan” - 06/12/1949

Frankie decides to adopt a French orphan.

CD 9A: “Frankie’s Foster Son”

- 06/19/1949

To keep his new son, Frankie needs to get married...and fast!

**CD 9B: “Concern About Contract
Renewal” - 06/26/1949**

Will Rexall renew for next season?



Phil and Alice with their real life daughters

CD 10A: “Phil Returns From Vacation” - 09/18/1949

Back from vacation, Phil is ready to go for the new season.

CD 10B: “Keeping Regular Office Hours” - 09/25/1949

Mr. Scott insists that Phil keep regular office hours.



Alice Faye and Phil Harris

Elizabeth McLeod is a journalist, author, and broadcast historian. She received the 2005 Ray Stanich Award for excellence in broadcasting history research from the Friends Of Old Time Radio.

If you enjoyed this CD set, we recommend *The Phil Harris - Alice Faye Show: The First 20 Episodes*, available now at www.RadioSpirits.com.



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