

Radio Noir, Part 4

THE THREE FACES OF JACK

The Radio Career of Jack Webb

by Anne Hockens

Dum, du-dum, dum. Dum, du-dum, dum, dah. Ladies and gentlemen, the story you are about to hear is true. Only the names have been changed to protect the innocent.

Has an actor ever been so identified with a show's opening as Jack Webb with *Dragnet's*? Even today, when people hear the name Jack Webb, they instantly think of Joe Friday and the pioneering TV show. What few know is that *Dragnet* had a previous incarnation on the radio, an enormous success that ushered in a new type of detective show, one steeped in realism. Further, his role in *Dragnet* was not Webb's first detective. Before *Dragnet* there was *Pat Novak, For Hire* and *Jeff Regan, Investigator*, which presented far different takes on the detective archetype.

Modern audiences associate Jack Webb with his role as the stoic, straight arrow detective Joe Friday. However, Webb's first detective series *Pat Novak for Hire* (1946-1947) developed a cult following, and made Webb a star on the West Coast, by presenting a very different detective character. *Pat Novak* furthered an evolution begun by shows like *Richard Diamond, Private Detective* (1949-1953) and *The Adventures of Sam Spade, Detective* (1946-1950). Those shows were still essentially serious detective stories, but began to inject more intelligent and humorous dialogue and offbeat characterizations. Both *Diamond* and *Spade* were hard working and, while wisecracking, still heroic detectives. *Pat*, on the other hand, was shabby, desperate for money and easily duped. The opening of the show made his position in life clear, "That's what the sign out in front of my office says: *Pat Novak, For Hire*. Down on the waterfront in San Francisco you always bite off more than you can chew. It's tough on your windpipe, but you don't go hungry...Oh, I rent boats and do anything else which makes a sound like money..."

The plots were as thin as Novak's wallet. The episode "Dixie Gillian" (1946) represents a typical example. A beautiful woman hires Novak to threaten a man named Dixie Gillian with an empty gun and force him to leave town. Novak takes this sordid job despite misgivings that things will go wrong. Things do when he and Gillian fight. In the scuffle, the gun goes off, and Gillian dies. Lieutenant Hellman, Novak's arch enemy, gets an anonymous tip and shows up. Fate steps in and temporarily clears Novak. He spends the rest of the episode hunting down the truth, his only help coming from his drunken friend Jocko who insults him repeatedly and, tellingly, calls him "Patsy." This is the basic plot of every episode: Novak is hired, duped, almost lands in



jail, and in the end clears up the whole mess. These stories inevitably serve to underline Novak's generally misanthropic outlook on life, the only logical response to the incredibly hostile world he inhabits.

So, with such an anti-heroic lead character, why was the show such a huge hit? Simple: the writing. The dialog is sharp, fast and witty. In a typical exchange, the woman in the case, Leigh, arrives unannounced in Novak's apartment. She says sultrily, "Good evening." Novak responds sarcastically, "Yeah. Thanks for knock-

ing." Figuring sex appeal counts for something, she counters with "I don't think you mind my coming in without warning." He says, "No. I get the cabbage smell from next door the same way." Ouch.

Writer Richard Breen also studs every script with the most insanely campy metaphors ever uttered by a detective. In the *Dixie Gillian* script, Novak describes Leigh: "Her voice was alright, too. It reminded you of a furnace full of marshmallows." He describes his predicament while standing next to Gillian's corpse: "... because if homicide caught me here I'd have about as much chance as a canary in a basement full of cats. I started for the door, but right then I knew I could start ordering birdseed."

The success of *Novak* inspired Webb and Breen to leave San Francisco's KGO and try their luck in Hollywood on the national radio networks. *Novak's* ratings started to drop with their departure. Building on their previous success, Webb and Breen teamed up and did a sound-alike show called *Johnny Modero, Pier 23* (1947). Webb also did guest shots on anthology programs like *The Whistler* and *Escape*. Two things happened that started his move towards *Dragnet*. First, he appeared in the semi-documentary style film noir *He Walked by Night* (1948), in which he played a forensic expert. During that shoot, he met Detective Sergeant Marty Wynn of the Los Angeles Police Department. These experiences inspired him to begin creating a new kind of detective show, one that would emphasize realism and actual police procedure.

In the meantime, he took on the role of *Jeff Regan, Investigator* (1948). The plotting of *Regan* begins a migration from the outlandish campiness of *Novak* toward the later highly-detailed realism of *Dragnet*; and the *Regan* character's morality occupies a mid-spot between those two detectives. Jeff Regan works as a private eye for the avaricious Anthony J. Lyon. As Regan succinctly tells Lyon during an argument in "The Lawyer and the Lady," "You'd kidnap your own mother for cash... and then starve charging yourself ransom." Lyon sends him to their new client, a lawyer with an unknown problem. Lyon doesn't care if the work is legal or not as long as the check is good. Regan complains but goes anyway; he's got ethics but needs to make a living. When he interviews his new client, Kramer, someone takes a potshot at the shyster. Regan soon finds himself playing bodyguard to the corrupt lawyer.

Regan typically encounters a number of interesting supporting characters during his cases. In this one, as he investigates who would want to kill the lawyer, he encounters a sassy secretary named Emmy with whom he shares a flirtation. He then meets a 285-pound ex-con named Jamison who beats him

WEBB'S VALENTINE TO JAZZ

When Jack Webb was a kid, a neighboring musician introduced him to jazz, which became a life-long obsession. He incorporated jazz music into his career whenever possible. His first radio program was a breakfast show featuring jazz music, *The Coffee Club* (1946). Early on, Webb also starred in the free-wheeling *Jack Webb Show* (1946), written by Richard Breen. The show featured comedy routines as well as a live band that played Dixieland Jazz.

During his successful run in *Dragnet*, he created, produced and starred in *Pete Kelly's Blues* (1951) which ran as a summer replacement. Set in a 1920's speakeasy, Webb played Pete, a red hot trumpeter, who always seemed to run afoul of a gangster inhabiting the club. The show was not picked up as a permanent series. However, Webb brought the story, character and title back both a film in 1955 which he starred in, and as a television show in 1959 with William Reynolds in the lead.

with brass knuckles in the middle of an ice cream parlor. Regan then spends time with Kramer's wife, who's loyal and sympathetic, different from *Novak's* usual femme fatales. Well-written dialog and good performances make the characters more three-dimensional than those in *Novak*. Several plot twists and a few red herrings later, Regan solves the mystery, but loses his client and consequently his paycheck.

Although the plots and the characters of *Regan* were more varied and realistic than those on *Novak*, *Regan* shared its love of unusual metaphors: "This is a three-ring circus, and we haven't even got any peanuts." "This job had more ups and downs than the Berlin airlift." "Well, it all made sense, like a Ubangi with a piccolo." "Now it really made sense, like a mermaid on a bicycle." "The ends tie together like Siamese twins." "The whole thing came apart, like a paper hat in a shower bath."

As with *Novak*, when Webb departed from *Regan*, the ratings went down, but not his fortunes. ABC united him with writer Breen and revived *Pat Novak* for their national network in 1949. Webb also pitched his innovative idea for *Dragnet* to NBC at this time, where it received a less than enthusiastic response. However, Webb pressed on and created an audition episode. In creating *Dragnet*, the LAPD's approval was even more important to Webb than the studio's. The cornerstone of the show would be realism; he wanted the full cooperation of the police in order to use real cases and feature actual police procedure. During an unnerving first encounter, Chief of Police James E. Moser only listened to ten minutes of the show before leaving the room with no explanation. However, the show ultimately garnered the department's approval and cooperation.

The character of Joe Friday was an ordinary police sergeant, not a private detective like *Novak*, *Regan*, and the majority of investigators on the radio at the time. While capable of disgust for the world around him, his outlook on humanity was considerably brighter than that of his predecessors. He lacked their capacity for witty dialog and outrageous metaphor; he did, however, share their clipped speaking style and often angry tone. No glamorous dames for him; he was a bachelor living with his mother, and the women he met never tried to seduce him. Identification of the audience with his everyman characterization was reinforced at the beginning of each episode by the use of second person to describe his current case. For example, "You're a detective sergeant. You're assigned to homicide detail. A small boy is reported missing from his home. His age: nine years. Foul play is expected. Your job: find him."

This style of introduction also encouraged the viewer to identify with Friday, as if the audience was on assignment with him. Webb's goal was also to have the audience view the actual police as regular guys doing a dirty but necessary job. While the cases were real, they were often selected in order to make a point important to Webb, a strong supporter of the LAPD. In the infamous, "22 Rifle for Christmas" (1951) episode, Webb hoped to discourage parents from buying rifles for their kids as Christmas presents. His sensitive and realistic handling of this rather macabre tale added to its impact.

As the episode opens, Friday and his partner Ben Romero are investigating the disappearance of a young boy. Police procedure is followed closely: the patrolman calls in; he has found bloodstains in the missing child's backyard. The detectives stop and pick up a lab man on their way to the possible crime scene. The technician takes samples at the site and goes back to the lab. After calling in to their boss for a search detail, they interview the boy's mother. She's not hysterical, but as they talk, her worry increases. A



much more effective technique than having her out of control, the listeners can picture themselves in her situation. She discloses that there are two guns in the house, one a gift-wrapped rifle. When they go to look for it, they find only the gift wrap and box.

Friday and Romero report their progress to their boss, Thad Brown, and he opines, "22 rifle. Hmh. Nine year old boy. When are they going to learn? First its carbine cannons on the Fourth of July ... this time it's guns for Christmas ... there's a city ordinance against giving a gun to a kid ... a missing boy and a missing gun, there's blood on the ground and a missing shell, that's enough for me." Heavy-handed, but, of course, he's right. Another boy is shortly reported missing. The mystery then transforms into a melancholy drama, the gun for Christmas has led to a tragedy with terrible consequences for all the principals of the case. The episode is a sensitively directed drama; the parent's grief is heartbreaking, the surviving boy's shock tangible. But there's still a strong, unmistakable point being made to the listeners. At the end of the episode, Ben asks his partner, "Well, what's it all prove, Joe?" Friday responds, "You don't give a kid a gun for Christmas." Just in case the audience somehow missed the point.

Jack Webb brought *Dragnet* to television in 1951, where it became an influential and successful program. Webb's shift from playing detective roles bordering on parody to developing and starring in a pioneering police procedural reflected a bigger

change in American entertainment. Procedural police dramas surpassed private detective series in radio, television and film. While a few private detectives became popular in television over the last several decades—Jim Rockford, Thomas Magnum, and most recently, *Adrian Monk*—the cops for the most part have taken over. Today, you can, flip on any channel and see some lab tech picking up evidence at a crime scene, or a cop interviewing a suspect in the interrogation room.

You can thank Joe Friday for that. ■

HOW TO HEAR THESE SHOWS

Vast numbers of old-time radio (OTR) shows are available for free or at nominal cost. Visit www.archive.org for the programs mentioned here and many more. The Old Time Radio Researchers Group (otrr.org) has done a remarkable job with its stated goal to restore, preserve, and share classic shows from the "golden age of radio" (1930–60) and has the most complete collections of individual shows, information, and research. Radiospirits.com offers high-quality collections of radio shows on CD and cassette and streams its own daily shows. OTRcat.com also offers a wide range of shows, including British and South African programs.