

GUNSMOKE !

By GORDON BUDGE

If you had lived in Dodge City in the 1870's, Matt Dillon-the fictional Marshal of CBS Radio and TV's Gunsmoke-would have been just the sort of man you would like to have for a friend. The same holds for his sidekick, Chester, and his special pals, Kitty and Doc. They are down-to-earth, 'good and honest people.

That one word "honest" is, to a great extent, responsible for the success of ***Gunsmoke*** on both radio and TV. It best describes the stories, characters and detailed historical background which go to make up the show.

Norman Macdonnell and John Meston, ***Gunsmoke's*** producer and writer, are the two men who created the format and guided the show to its success (the TV version has topped the Nielsen ratings since June, 1957) and the show is a fair reflection of their own characters: Producer Macdonnell is a straightforward, clear-thinking young man of forty-two, born in Pasadena and raised in the West, with a passion for pure-bred quarter horses. He joined the CBS Radio network as a page, rose to assistant producer in two years, ultimately commanded such network properties as ***Suspense***, ***Escape***, and ***Philip Marlowe***.

Writer John Meston's checkered career began in Colorado some forty-three years ago and grass-hopped through Dartmouth ('35) to the Left Bank in Paris, school-teaching in Cuba, range-riding in Colorado, and ultimately, the job as Network Editor for CBS Radio in Hollywood.

It was here that Meston and Macdonnell met. After working together (***Continued on page 86***)

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briefly, they saw a need for a new type of show—a Western for adults. They wanted to call it “Jeff Spain,” after a character they had created and used on several of the anthology shows they had done together. But CBS Radio’s then vice-president, Harry Ackerman (now producing at Screen Gems), had given birth to a new title, “Gunsmoke” which the network wanted to use. So, in the matter-of-fact manner of their hero, Matt Dillon—who does what he thinks is right—Meston and Macdonnell did “Jeff Spain” and called it “Gunsmoke.”

To a large extent, Macdonnell’s and Meston’s careers hung on this radio gamble. But it paid off. In the first few weeks, the show burst into national prominence with the explosive force of a Gatling gun. The fan mail indicated they had created a new hit show—and a new star, in radio actor Bill Conrad. The interesting thing about this fan mail—which still floods CBS—is that it came from a highly educated section of the population: Doctors, lawyers, and Indian chiefs. (Indian chiefs liked ***Gunsmoke*** because of its “honest Western flavor.”)

In both the radio and television versions, producer Macdonnell has a passion for detail. After the first few episodes, he and his three soundmen came to realize that real gunshots were too loud for the microphone to handle. So producer Macdonnell and his crew, on their own time and money, bought .44, .45 and Winchester guns and ammunition, and took a five-day trip to the desert. They fired repeated volleys in every possible combination—in canyons, against rocks, and inside the shuttered cabins of a “ghost town.” All of this was put on tape. Says Macdonnell succinctly, “When you hear a fusillade followed by a single shot from a .45, that’s Matt.”

Bill Conrad—who has been playing Matt Dillon since 1952, when ***Gunsmoke*** first rode out on the Western airways—is a radio and character actor of great ability, and himself a man of personal contrasts. Not at all like the poorly-read Matt, Conrad is a first-order Shakespearean student, is easily absorbed by the music of Mozart, has already gone beyond hi-fi to the realm of binaural sounds. A ruggedly masculine man, with dark hair and a dark mustache, Conrad is also an athlete of exceptional ability. He skis, fishes and hunts with **quiet** determination.

“The most important thing about Bill,” says Macdonnell, “is not a physical de-

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scription or anything you can see on the outside. It's his character: He's very much like what John and I imagined Matt Dillon to be—a gruff exterior, but a heart of gold.

"Much of Matt Dillon's character grew out of Bill Conrad," he continues. "Which points up what a really great actor he is—basically a literary student, he became a rugged Western marshal. There are times, in fact, that you can't tell where Matt Dillon begins and Bill Conrad ends off . . . after the first three or four shows, we found ourselves unconsciously writing Matt's dialogue to fit Bill's personality."

To a degree, the same thing happened later to James Arness, who plays the TV version of Matt Dillon. Like Bill Conrad, Jim has undergone a tremendous personal identification with the character.

"In addition," says producer Macdonnell, "Jim has a personal fondness for that period of American history. He says it was virile and strong and he finds it challenging. I had lunch with him the other day and, when he came in off the **Gunsmoke** frontier street, he plumped down in the commissary chair, banged his big fist on the counter and exploded, 'Man . . . that was an era. Everything was right on the table!'

"Those words describe Matt Dillon and Dodge City in the '70's," Macdonnell notes. "Everything was out in the open. There was no subterfuge, no neurosis, no artifices or superficiality. Life was straightforward, bone-simple and honest. Is it any wonder Jim Arness finds the character to his liking?"

The personalities of the fictional characters on **Gunsmoke** have a habit of rubbing off on the real-life actors who play them: Pretty red-headed, New York-born Amanda Blake, who plays Kitty in the TV version, knew that the Lone Ranger rode Silver—but that's all she knew about horses. In fact, she appeared in a dozen **Gunsmokes** before she rode her first horse. Then, after dismounting, she said, "Great heavens, this is wonderful! I've got to learn to ride better so I can ride in more shows!"

Another reason that the TV version of **Gunsmoke** is so successful, according to Macdonnell, is the fact that it had three years on radio during which all the characters were being fairly well delineated. They became well-rounded people, and their speech, attitudes and opinions were well established. When the TV actors were introduced to these lovingly molded characters, they got to know them in record time, fell into their patterns easily.

The fact is that the actors have come to know the individual characters they play a great deal better than their creators, writer Meston and producer Macdonnell. Milburn Stone, who plays "Doc," on TV, has gotten to know the testy medic like his alter ego; and "Milly," who has had at least twenty-five years' acting experience, will refuse to read a line at rehearsal if he feels it isn't honestly part of Doc's character. "I won't read it! I won't read it!" he blusters. "Doc would never say that!"

But, for honesty in the portrayal of a character, all admit that young Dennis Weaver, who plays Chester Proudfoot on TV, and Parley Baer, who plays Chester on radio, are by far the most dedicated actors of the group. Milly Stone—who has trod the boards as a child star, sung in barber-shop quartets, played straight man in variety shows and worked under world-famous director John Ford—will frequently check with Dennis on his interpretation of a tough scene. Milly, a man with great acting experience, thinks Dennis Weaver is a tremendous acting talent, and the greatest thing since Wheaties.

Macdonnell agrees. "Dennis is forever studying," he says. "He's even formed his own acting school. Dennis's whole life is bound up in two things: Athletics and acting. But acting is by far his first love. He's so intent on a scene being honest that he'll throw away his own lines, give them to somebody else—or, if necessary, cut himself out of the scene entirely."

Gunsmoke is a success for many reasons. Two of these are Macdonnell and Meston themselves, both honest men, with a love of the West bred in their bones—Meston a cowpoke, and Macdonnell a passionate quarter-horse breeder. Another reason is that three-year shakedown on radio.

"Just the" other day," says Macdonnell, "John Meston and I were talking about doing something to the show—maybe adding a quality somewhere. I know this is a strange thing to say, but we decided there was no new element to add. In the three years we were fortunate enough to have done some 117 scripts on radio, we had pretty well gotten all of the cricks and crackles out of it."

A third and most important reason is the fact that both the TV and radio *Gunsmoke* characters have a "family teamwork" quality. They all get along like boots 'n' stirrups. Fifty-five million weekly listeners and viewers agree that they're the kind of folks you like to have for friends, today—as well as in the 1870's.