Any way you look at it, *Gunsmoke* is a prodigy among TV shows. It has been in the vanguard of the “adult” Westerns and of the so-called “psychological” Westerns—although its makers deny any responsibility for the latter. It was—and still is—the most literate Western. It has transformed its actors from little-known bit players into celebrities mobbed everywhere they go; made tidy fortunes for its creators, and sold enough cigarettes to stretch several times around the world.

Even more amazing under Chester (Dennis Weaver), Marshal Dillon (James Arness and Doc Adams (Milburn Stone) are three reasons for show’s success.
the circumstances, it is the most popular show of any sort on the air today—and has been right at the top ever since its beginning in radio. This despite the fact that it very often has no story in the commonly accepted sense of the word, sometimes being little more than a character sketch or vignette. Since everyone envies—and no one argues with—success, it inevitably has become the most widely imitated show. Some of the things Matt Dillon does, which used to be continued
thought pretty daring, have become
cliche’s because every Western does
them. Thus it is fair to say Gunsmoke
is also the most influential of its kind.

How did it get that way? And
what’s more to the point, how does it
manage to stay that way?

Like most successes, this one was
achieved partly by accident and partly
by dogged perseverance over the
chorus of “experts” who swore it
couldn’t be done.

Back in 1952 there were laboring in
the vineyards of CBS radio a couple
of young men named Norman Mac-
donnell and John Meston. Meston, a
Dartmouth graduate, is an angular-
faced, strangely inarticulate-seeming
man—a Colorado product who had
spent a good deal of time working on
southern Colorado ranches. Macdon-
nell, on the other hand, had come by
his love of cowhands and their patois
through a stable he had acquired in-
of all places-Hollywood.

They had the notion that a Western
might be done for radio which would
be, as Macdonnell puts it, “non-horse-
operatic,” where everyone would be-
have more or less as human beings
behave in real life, where the char-
acters would resemble the real articles.
They sat down and made out a list of
all the things they planned not to do.
No one would be allowed to say
“sidewinding varmint,” no one would
carry two guns slung low on the hip,
no one would have a favorite horse,
much less one that did tricks.

Instead, the show would operate on
the revolutionary but entirely valid
principle that in the early West the
most hated man in town was usually
the marshal.

“Half the time the town tamers were
worse than the gunmen they were
hired to tame,” explains Macdonnell.
“And they were constantly suspect,
no matter what good guys they were.

And Matt Dillon is no exception. If
you look closely you will see that
there are only three in the world who
care at all whether Matt lives or dies.
One is Doc, who digs the bullets
out of him; another is Chester, who
admires him and calls him Muster
Dellon, and the other is Kitty, the
dance-hall girl, who loves him.”

So Meston wrote a radio show called
“Jeff Spain.” When they showed it
to a then-top-executive of CBS, Harry
Ackerman, he told them they must be
out of their minds. “Westerns are for
children,” he said flatly, and the idea
was dropped.

However, a month or so later a
show called “Operation Underground”
suddenly went off the air and the net-
work was left with an embarrassing
gap in its programming. Ackerman, as
it turned out, had his own title for a
Western—“Gunsmoke.”

“After that,” says Meston, “every-
thing was simple, We simply did ‘Jeff
Spain’ and called it ‘Gunsmoke.’ ”

The show was an immediate success.
Even the hardest-to-please critics
were impressed. Then three months
later something transpired which
made Macdonnell and Meston look
like heroes. A movie called “High
Noon” as released and suddenly the
adult Western came into almost uni-
versal public acceptance. “Gunsmoke”
was off and running so far ahead of
the field that no one could catch it.

Three years later the transition was
made to television. For this delicate
operation a new producer-director
was brought in, an ebullient gentle-
man named Charles Marquis Warren,
while Macdonnell functioned as asso-
ciate producer and Meston continued
to write the radio scripts. It was War-
ren who cast the television version-
and on this score he fought both
Macdonnell and Meston, who were de-
termined to simply use the radio cast,
regardless of whether or not the actors
suited their roles visually.
Warren won—luckily, because his casting was inspired: Big Jim Arness (whose best-known previous credit had been the title role in “The Thing”), hulking, fatherly, capable of great toughness and tenderness; Dermis Weaver, the slightly comic yet human and dignified hanger-on around the jail house; Milburn Stone, perfect as the elder statesman and wise man, “Doc”; and Amanda Blake, whose Kitty strikes a perfect balance between the hardness of her profession and the softness which makes her acceptable in every American home.

As it had in radio, Gunsmoke immediately proved a smash. What’s more, the TV version had what amounted to an inexhaustible supply of scripts. The radio shows—for the most part—were adapted to the new medium. Then success began to go to everyone’s head. According to Warren, “It reached the point where I’d arrive on the set in the morning only to have Arness tell me that ‘Matt Dillon wouldn’t say a line like that!’ Everybody suddenly got to be a self-appointed authority.”

After a year of this, Warren left, and the show reverted to Macdonnell and Meston.

And it should be said that it is primarily their taste and judgment that make the show what it is today. What’s their secret?

“Well,” says Macdonnell, “we try to capture some of the real feeling of the West. As well as something real in the people. As soon as your lead becomes a hero, you’re in trouble. Sometimes we’ll sit down and say to ourselves, You know, this fellow Dillon is just getting too noble. Let’s fix him.” So we do. John writes a script where poor old Matt gets outdrawn and outgunned and pulls every dumb trick in the book. It makes him, and us, human.

“Then there is the trick of underwriting. John used to underwrite so much he’d drive everybody crazy, especially on radio. You know—with the sparse dialog and long pauses. They kept telling us, ‘You can’t do it.’ Every time somebody’d come up with that one, John would ask in his mumbling way, ‘Where in the book does it say you can’t?’ So we did.

“We both like the sound of real cowboy talk. Some of it gets on the show. Like the time I heard a cow-hand of mine admiring a new mare. ‘Looks as if she might run a hole in the wind,’ he said. John used the line in a script.”

Meston’s principal preoccupation is with character. Indeed, he has been accused of not being able to write stories at all. Be this as it may, he has written some 160 radio scripts and each one of them has begun, he says, with a phrase, a scrap of dialog or some minute aspect of Western Americana that just happens to please him. “I like to write with great simplicity,” he says. “And I like to have my people solve real problems realistically. I like character better than story, and to tell the truth I like radio writing better than television. In radio there is more play for the imagination.”

It was Meston who conceived of the Chester character always calling Matt “Muster Dellon.” This would not be unusual except that it has always seemed so inexorably right. Warren invented Chester’s limp (to explain away Chester’s constant presence around the marshal’s office). Again, like almost everything in it is somehow fitting.

Says Warren, who is currently producing a fancy new Western of his own called Rawhide: “Gunsmoke? It proves that people will still go for folksy persiflage and that get-nowhere dialog. But, you know, it’s got something. Just don’t ask me what.”

Dwight Whitney