

Aging Lifestyles: Can a vintage radio show find an audience today?

by Joe_Volz

Isn't it time to return to the thrilling days of yesteryear - as depicted in those vivid radio shows like "The Lone Ranger," "The Shadow" and "Gunsmoke?"

Television is in the doldrums as the writers' strike drags on. We are sentenced to watching reruns or old pilots resurrected from the cutting room floor - and, of course, there are endless "reality shows," far removed from reality. But there is a delightful entertainment medium that has been gathering dust - radio drama.

As kids in the 1940s, we tuned in every Monday, Wednesday and Friday as the Lone Ranger and his great horse, Silver, thundered into our living rooms from the studios of WXYZ in Detroit. Those were the golden days of radio long ago also starring the Shadow, sponsored by a coal company, for some reason, and Marshal Dillon in "Gunsmoke."

Well, those radio voices are back. Public radio stations across the country once again are broadcasting the old shows. WAMU-FM in Washington, for example, broadcasts hours of the old shows every Sunday.

The Lone Ranger was my favorite. The deep-voiced masked man, accompanied by his faithful Indian sidekick, Tonto, invariably rounded up the bad guys without firing a shot. If the Lone Ranger had to shoot, he never killed the perpetrator. He just shot the gun out of his hand.

You might call the Lone Ranger the original Old West social worker. He made a specialty out of helping widows and orphans. Of course, today, in our politically correct world, some adjustments would have to be made to the script. For one thing, Tonto could not be called an "Indian." That's a no-no. He would, no doubt, be labeled a "Native American executive assistant." And the Lone Ranger's sanity would come under serious scrutiny. What kind of a weirdo would ride around wearing a mask all the time firing silver bullets? No doubt he would be carted off to the loony bin.

Well, you modern day radio listeners will have to suspend belief a bit. After all, thank goodness, radio never pretended to offer reality drama.

Another battler against injustice was a wealthy New Yorker, Lamont Cranston, who, while on a trip to the Orient, learned how to cloud men's minds. Make himself invisible.

The Shadow was quite a philosopher, informing us each week that "the weed of crime bears bitter fruit. Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men? The Shadow knows."

Today, he would, no doubt, be occupying a bed next to the Lone Ranger in the nuthouse.

And there was the famous "Gunsmoke" series, starring gravel-voiced William Conrad as Marshal Dillon, patrolling the lonely prairie west of Dodge and hanging out in a saloon with Miss Kitty, the warmhearted proprietor of a brothel - the B word was never even hinted at.

Kids lucky enough to miss a day of school because they were sick were treated to a different type of radio fare. The heroes were not strong men but powerful women, who had survived every known indignity, from philandering husbands to abject poverty. But they never surrendered to self-pity.

Those daytime soap operas - soap companies sponsored them - always asked a question, which, of course, was never answered. There was "Our Gal Sunday," the story that asked the question, "Can a girl from a small mining town in Colorado find happiness as the wife of a wealthy English nobleman?" The answer was, "maybe," but not without a lot of trauma.

And how about Helen Trent, the lonely wardrobe mistress who was forever trying to figure out if there were any joy, even in Hollywood, for a single woman past 35?

Mary Noble had a different problem. She had found a husband but he was a matinee idol, constantly besieged by groupies. The show was "Mary Noble, Backstage Wife," later lampooned by the comic team, Bob Elliott and Ray Goulding, who aired their own program, "Mary Backstage, Noble Wife."

My own soap opera favorite was Ma Perkins, a middle-aged widow who ran a lumberyard. Ma prevailed over all manner of calamities.

Radio, of course, left a lot to the imagination.

Those were the days, my friends.

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