

Inner Sanctum Mysteries

1941-1952



Raymond Edward Johnson was the voice that personified *Inner Sanctum Mysteries*.

Inner Sanctum Mysteries was a horror anthology series with a unique sound and a very popular host. For the first four years, "Raymond" greeted guests after an incredibly squeaky door *slowly* opened at the beginning of each show. His ghoulish puns were accentuated with the flourish of what sounded like a baseball park organ. The stories themselves were directed by Himan Brown, one of the most prolific and talented radio directors of all time (*Flash Gordon*, *Dick Tracy*, *Bulldog Drummond*, *The Adventures of the Thin Man*, *Terry and the Pirates*, *Grand Central Station*, and many others). The stories took all sorts of twists and turns, and the body count often exceeded the number of commercials. As Brown himself described it, "We've killed our characters every way. We've knifed them, garroted them, burned them, poisoned them, bashed their heads, given them rare and fantastic diseases, pushed them out of windows and over cliffs." ([Grams](#), 2002, 7) The mood was straight faced and serious, except that Raymond would return during the breaks and loosen up the crowd with his morbid sense of humor. His laugh was particularly sinister, and the organ player (Lew White) knew just how to play off of it.

Inner Sanctum featured classic actors, including Boris Karloff, Peter Lorre, Mercedes McCambridge, Richard Widmark, Santos Ortega, Simone Simon, Raymond Massy, Mason Adams, Agnus Moorehead and countless others. In addition to the foreboding background music, the tension filled atmosphere was something to die for. Talk about spooky! The crickets and hoot owls worked overtime, along with the sound effects man, who's most common effect was probably a shovel digging dirt for another late night grave.

"I use sound unashamedly," Brown told *The New York Times* in 1948. "In a program like *Inner Sanctum*, where mood is of the essence, I believe in a minimum of writing. The sound really gives the picture. So let the sound carry it." Brown then gave an example of the type of story telling that *Inner Sanctum* delivered without words. "A car pulls up. Car door opens. Footsteps on gravel, with background of wind and owl sounds. Footsteps stop. Clank of handle of iron door (obviously of mausoleum). Door opens. Footsteps resume, this time on stone, and outdoor effects of wind and owl fade out. Door clanks shut. Then the

actor can scream out in terror." ([Grams](#), 2002, 21) Scenes like that really put listeners in the thick of the action, and they gave *Inner Sanctum* an especially vivid atmosphere that other horror shows lacked, despite equally good plots.



Raymond Edward Johnson's last show on *Inner Sanctum* was May 15, 1945, when he left to serve in the Army. In a 1990 phone interview, Himan Brown told me that the reason Raymond didn't return as host after his military service was because "he wanted too much money!" (And he still sounded pretty put out about it when he said it, despite the passing of nearly 50 years. Read [a letter](#) sent us by someone who knew Raymond for his side of the story.) Brown also related his oft-told-story about how he came up with the famous idea for the opening sequence. "There was this old door down in the basement of the studio that really squeaked like hell. One day I heard it and told my assistant, 'I'm gonna make that door a star!' And I did!" He did indeed. When listeners heard that door open, they knew they were in for some thrills and chills. He slowly closed the unnerving door at the end of each episode, while Raymond would conclude his gallows humor with--"And now it's time to close the squeaking door. (A long squeak begins and continues...) Good nihi-ight. Pleasant... dreams? Heh-heh-heh-heh-haaaaaaaah!" The door would shut and the organ would crescendo. It was such an effective opening, Brown recycled it in the 1970s for the [CBS Radio Mystery Theater](#), which he also directed.

Raymond's replacement was Paul McGrath (although Berry Kroeger had substituted earlier for a total of four episodes). McGrath was a Broadway actor who turned to radio to pay the bills. He also did the off-screen narration for the *Inner Sanctum* TV series in 1953-1954. ([Grams](#), 2002, 52) His *Inner Sanctum* persona was known simply as "your Host." So was House Jameson when he hosted later on in the series ([Grams](#), 2000, 266).

Among most fans, Raymond remained the favorite though, except for the season he was forced to share the stage with the insipid "Lipton Tea woman", who's scolding of his dark humor spoiled the ambiance and was completely out of character for the show. But despite the presence of Mary (the so-called Tea Lady) it was one heck of a show. Some feel it took itself too seriously and the plots were too unbelievable, making it comes across as camp. That seems to be a minority view though, and regardless, both sides still agree it was an enjoyable series (they just disagree over the reasons). *Inner Sanctum* remains popular with old and new listeners to this day. What a pity that less than 1/5 of the 535 original episodes are known to have survived. ([Grams](#), 2002, 1)

Inner Sanctum was inducted into the [National Radio Hall of Fame](#) in 1988. Himan Brown died in June of 2010 at the age of 99.



Original 1940s newspaper ads for *Inner Sanctum*.

A Typical Introduction:

(Hear it in Real Audio!)

(SFX: A door with very squeaky hinges is sloooooowly opened. Organ begins to play.)

Host: "Good evening friends of the Inner Sanctum. This is Raymond, your host. I'm glad you came tonight, because we have a very special guest of horror with us. I'd like you meet the late Johnny Gravestone. The most celebrated member of the Inner Sanctum Ghost Society. He's the best haunter of them all. Johnny's the tall figure in the white sheet wearing the blue ribbon. He's haunted everything from a palace to a telephone booth. And uh, if you're very nice to him, he'll be glad to consider giving your house the once over. Who knows? He might even haunt you? Ha-ha-ha-ha!"

(Commercial.)

"Well, we're about to begin our story. Oh, I forgot to warn you about the Tremblins. They're those pesky, invisible cousins of the gremlins. They uh, saddle up to you, give quick little shoves, and give the false impression that you're trembling. If you're being troubled by a Tremblin, just grab him by his invisible little horns and stick him into the nearest pin cushion."

An Opening Narration:

Host: "Dusk is settling fast along the Carolina coast. A few miles out at sea, a motor boat rides though the choppy waters. Doctor Griffin and Richard Black are frantically scanning the horizon looking for Richard's wife Barbara, who's lost in a sailboat..."

An Ending Narration:

Host: "Well, um, Doctor Griffin lost the good fight. Um-hmm. He was gull crazy. That was no gull, that was Richard's wife! Anyway, the Inner Sanctum Ghost Society is mad at Doctor Griffin because he's interfering with the drive for new members. Say, by the way, if you should hear the wild cry of birds in your next dream, don't be alarmed. It's just that Spring is on it's way..."

(Commercial.)

"Be sure to listen next week for lovely Judith Evelyn will be back with us again in a sweet little story just full of beautiful murder..."

The Standard Closing:

Host: "Well, now it's time to close the squeaking door of the Inner Sanctum until next week. So good night... Pleasant dreammmmmssss?"

(SFX: Squeaking door sloooowly closes shut.)

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