

SUSPENSE

an introduction

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On September 30, 1962 a major milestone in radio drama came to an end with the final episode of the long running series, SUSPENSE. Ironically, the episode was titled "Devil Stone" and was the last dramatic radio play from a series that had its roots in the golden age of radio. What began as a "new series frankly dedicated to your horrification and entertainment" took on a life of its own mostly due to the talents of some outstanding producers and adaptations and original stories from the cream of mystery writers of the time. The golden age of radio was truly the golden age of SUSPENSE as show after show broadcast outstanding plays which were "calculated to intrigue...stir [the] nerves."

It was the series' first producer, William Spier, who set the framework of rules that was to stay with the show for most of its run. Mr. Spier determined that the series should deal with life-and-death situations established near the beginning of each play and then through the use of Bernard Herrmann's musical coloring and the writer's characterizations slowly tighten the knot of suspense. Many of the early stories were written by the mystery writer, John Dickson Carr. Others were by such fine writers as Lucille Fletcher, whose Suspense play, "Sorry, Wrong Number" was turned into a major motion picture; Robert Arthur, Robert L. Richards, Morton Fine and David Friedkin. The series also drew from the mystery writers of the day as well as the horror writers of literature; writers such as Edgar Allen Poe, H.P. Lovecraft, Cornell Woolrich, Dorthy L. Sayers and H.G. Wells.

Many of the stories produced by Mr. Spier are now classics of the genre. Listen to the likes of "The House in Cypress Canyon" as a young couple encounters something in the closet of their new home, something horrible and dangerous; or "The Hitchhiker" in which a man driving cross-country seems to be haunted by an ominous figure, who keeps reappearing trying to get a ride. But what foreboding does the hitchhiker hold for the driver?

Another rule William Spier established was to make the series a place to hear the talents of Hollywood's famous actors. There rarely was a famous actor who did not appear on the series at some time. Jimmy Stewart, Cary Grant, Humphrey Bogart, Lucille Ball, Olivia De Havilland and many others all made at least one appearance. The series had a generous budget from its network, CBS.

In 1948 the series had become popular enough that it was decided to broadcast for a complete hour, instead of the former thirty minutes. The actor Robert Montgomery was brought in to introduce the plays, replacing the "Man in Black" character and occasionally star in them. This format lasted only six months most probably due to the realization that the show worked best within a thirty minute framework.

It was at this time that William Spier left and over the years others came to produce the shows, each setting his own unique mark. Anton M. Leader, who came from producing another horror radio program, MURDER AT MIDNIGHT, added some lighter suspense stories which focused more on the central characters. Jimmy Stewart appeared in an excellent story about a paralysed war veteran who thinks he has found the man who imprisoned and tortured him. Fibber McGee & Molly appeared in a tale about a killer on the loose in "Backseat Driver."

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Probably the biggest change in SUSPENSE came under the producing eye of Elliott Lewis. Lewis brought in comic actors to play serious roles. Actors such as Jack Benny, Red Skelton and Ozzie Nelson. He also was not afraid to experiment using the series slot for classic "murder" stories such as "Othello."

The series continued to produce high-quality drama, though there were many repeats as well as borrowing of scripts from other radio shows. While a number of film actors continued to star occasionally, many of the stars were from radio and television since radio as a dramatic art form was beginning to lose its popularity and budgets were tightened.

The show was on the air for a little over twenty years beginning in January, 1942 and was rarely pre-empted. There were 947 performances. Nearly all (approximately 895) are available to collectors. When SUSPENSE left the air, radio was never to see the likes of such a series again. Now the great medium of radio where imagination can run free has been reduced to the occasional brilliant drama airing sporadically in some corner of the world. SUSPENSE was a golden moment in a golden age. A moment when the thrill of the nighttime led the listener along the path of intrigue, horror and dangerous adventure.