

# What Evil Lurks in the Heart of Radio?



*Don't touch that dial:*  
Dominick Cancilla looks back at some of the classic shows that once haunted those glowing tubes and tells us where to find them — *if you dare...*



There's something in a ghost story told through spoken word, a certain creepiness and immediacy, which doesn't exist in any other media. You can't stop the story, as a reader might put down a book which has become uncomfortably intense. And you can't distance yourself from a well-told tale by nitpicking the visuals or special effects. It's for this reason that some of the best horror can be found on the worn disks and dusty tapes of the great radio shows.

From the late 1930s through the early 1960s, radio was a dominant media for storytelling. Every kind of fiction was presented — drama, comedy, period pieces, speculative fiction. A fair number of shows devoted themselves in whole or in part to horror, both literary and original. Thanks to legions of fans and preservation organizations, many of those shows can still be enjoyed today.

Not every radio show was successful in delivering horror, and some of the greatest horrors can be found in shows which are not thought of as horrific. In this article, we're going to take a quick survey of radio horror and help you sort the creepy from the crummy.

#### **The Shadow (1930-1954)**

*The Shadow* enjoys a significant fan base to this day, and some people will be a bit annoyed at my having it in a list of horror shows. They might be even more annoyed at my mentioning it first, but since I'm listing shows roughly chronologically, there's not much that can be done about that. True, *The Shadow* was largely a detective show with a supernatural overtone, but some of the episodes were quite horrific. For example, check out "Murder Underground," broadcast March 9, 1941. Some of the audio images, involving feeding people to hungry wharf rats, are so striking that I'm amazed they were broadcast on radio in the '40s.

Over the years, several different actors played the lead in *The Shadow*. Perhaps most recognizable to modern audiences, Orson Wells was Lamont Cranston for a good period of time. His Shadow had more mystical powers than the Shadow of some of his successors, but for my money Wells just sounds too calm all the time.

#### **The Witch's Tale (1931-1938)**

One of the earliest horror anthology shows, *The Witch's Tale* follows the very familiar "weird stories by a weird narrator" format. In this case, it's the stereotypical witch Old Nancy and her cat Satan who have stories to tell. It's largely about haunted houses, supernatural revenge, and the like, and, unfortunately, the stories have not aged well, to the point that they may be almost laughable to a modern audience.

#### **Lights Out (1934-1947)**

Arch Oboler's *Lights Out* was one of the most technically proficient radio shows, particularly where sound effects are concerned. One episode, "The Dark," concerns a patch of blackness that turns anyone who enters it inside out (with, as you can imagine, gruesome results). The sound effect was accomplished using a rubber glove, but it creates a mental picture more horrible than anything that could have been created in a more visual media, particularly at that time.

One *Lights Out* episode, "The Chicken Heart," inspired a particularly memorable Bill Cosby routine. If you have heard the Cosby retell the story as he remembers it from childhood, then you have essentially heard the original, which involves a mutant chicken heart that won't stop growing and which, because of its enormous size, is essentially immune to conventional weapons and destined to take over the globe. As silly as this sounds, and as silly as Cosby makes it sound, it's even sillier in the original, if only because the subject matter is treated so seriously.

#### **Dark Fantasy (1941-1942)**

A short-lived show which intermixed science fiction and just-plain-murder tales with more traditional horror. Only 31 episodes were broadcast, but most have survived. It's worth checking out.

#### **Inner Sanctum Mysteries (1941-1952)**

To many, *Inner Sanctum* is the very model of horror on radio. It features a wisecracking (think *Tales from the Crypt*) host, Raymond, who introduces each tale of horror. Many of the stories appear to be of the supernatural, but turn out to have mundane explanations at the end.

As a high-profile show, *Sanctum* was able to get some excellent actors — Peter Lorre, Boris Karloff, and Agnes Moorehead among them. Although most of the stories are, so far as I can tell, originals or adaptations from *Inner Sanctum Mysteries* magazine, a number of classics ("The Tell-Tale Heart," "The Horla") were also performed.

What really torpedoes *Inner Sanctum* for me (and, at the same time, makes it sort of horribly fascinating) is Raymond's foil, the Lipton Tea lady. As spokesperson for the show's sponsor, and a woman of delicate disposition, she often chides Raymond for his more gruesome remarks. Take 1945's episode, "The Song of the Slasher" (in which Raymond refers to himself as "The gay ghoul" — something he probably wouldn't do in a broadcast today). In that show, Raymond pokes fun at the sponsor's genteel air with a poem: "Beat her 'till she's black and blue, break her arms and legs in two, then tell her to brew, a cup of Lipton's tea for you." Not

exactly politically correct, eh? But the Lipton lady's response is hardly more forceful than, "Well now, that's not very pleasant. Let's say some good things about Lipton tea instead."

It's interesting to note that this series is so popular with some collectors that there have been problems with "forged" *Inner Sanctum* episodes. That is, an episode will be minorly altered and then renamed, to give the impression that a "new" — and therefore highly collectable — show is available. This makes things difficult for serious collectors and those who try and compile definitive episode logs.

### **Suspense (1942-1962)**

Now this is a great series! Nearly a thousand episodes were produced, and of course there are a few clunkers thrown in here and there, but for the most part *Suspense* is solid and delivers on its promise to "keep you in suspense". "Three Skeleton Key" was performed twice on *Suspense*, both times starring Vincent Price (in fact, *Suspense* re-used quite a number of Escape scripts). Success allowed *Suspense* to get the best actors and writers available, and their expertise is very much in evidence. Notable adaptations on *Suspense* include "The Lodger," "The Hitchhiker," "The Body Snatchers," "Du Mortuios," "The Thirty-Nine Steps," "Frankenstein," "A Shipment of Mute Fate," and various John Collier and Ray Bradbury stories. Because popular scripts were sometimes rebroadcast, and because radio shows generally didn't broadcast recordings as reruns, some shows can be heard with a variety of casts. For example, depending on when you tuned in, you might have heard "The Pit and the Pendulum" starring Jose Ferrer, Henry Hull, Vincent Price, or Raymond Burr. Both Orson Welles and Joseph Cotton starred in "The Most Dangerous Game."

One script which was never recast — even though it was broadcast eight times — was "Sorry Wrong Number." This show, possibly the best and best known tale of suspense ever written directly for radio, always starred Agnes Moorehead. Moorehead was so well known for this part that it would have been almost heresy to produce it with anyone else in her role (which makes it all the more unbelievable to me that she wasn't cast in the completely inferior film version). If you have never heard "Sorry Wrong Number," you are in for a treat. It is largely a monologue, and a very intense one at that, in which an unpleasant,

bedridden woman tries to convince the police that she has someone plotting a murder due to a crossed phone line. It is said that Moorehead would appear sweat-drenched and exhausted after each performance, which makes it all the more amazing that on at least some occasions she had to perform it twice in one night — once for the east coast and once for the west coast. Moorehead also appeared on *Suspense* in "The Yellow Wallpaper," and an update of Dickens' "The Signalman," among other shows. (By the way, if you are only familiar with Moorehead from her running role on *Bewitched*, then you really need to get out more often.)

Other notably horrific *Suspense* broadcasts include:

- A two-part "Donovan's Brain" starring Orson Welles.
- An adaptation of John Collier's "Du Mortuios" starring Charles Laughton which successfully doubles the length of the original story (the original forms the first half of the script).
- Excellent versions of Ray Bradbury's "Zero Hour" and "The Whole Town's Sleeping."
- "The Tip" in which Lurene Tuttle plays a woman forced to sit at home and wait for her husband to come home so her captor can kill him.
- "The Shelter," which is possibly the only good "I heard on the radio that there's a maniac loose" show ever broadcast.
- "The Long Night," starring Frank Lovejoy as an air traffic controller who receives a plea for help from an inexperienced — and lost — pilot. The ending is one of the best twists I've heard.
- "The Man Who Wanted To Be Edward G. Robinson" starring Edward G. Robinson both as himself and as the title character. A great piece of acting (thought not particularly horrific).
- A positively fabulous version of Lovecraft's "The Dunwich Horror" with sound effects so good that you need to listen to it with headphones.

### **The Mysterious Traveler (1943-1952)**

This is one of my favorite old-time radio shows (if you can get yourself to forget its occasional, forgettable science-fiction episodes). The show's conceit is that the listener has taken a seat on a train next to the Mysterious Traveler who entertains you with a story as you wait for your stop. It's a neat, unusual storytelling gimmick, often used to great effect as the Traveler tells you

you've reached your stop and must get off the train just as he's about to reveal some additional juicy tidbit about the story you've just heard.

"Behind the Locked Door" is one of the most requested *Mysterious Traveler* shows, and for good reason. It involves a man who stumbles across a group of people who have been trapped underground for generations. I dare not say more than that for fear of giving away some of the juicy details, but the episode is well worth hunting down.

Another episode, broadcast on March 24, 1945, is also well worth listening to, but has one fatal flaw — its title. If at all possible, get someone to find a copy for you without revealing the episode's name, and have them double check that the story isn't named when it's introduced. Why? Because the fabulous twist ending of the story is revealed in its title. What bozo was in charge of naming these things, anyway?

### **The Weird Circle (1943-1947)**

A rather wooden horror anthology series. Among the 78 existing shows, there are some interesting points, however. In "The Tell-Tale Heart," the narrator is given two inner voices, a neighbor is introduced, and the famed "vulture eye" is replaced by a "scorpion eye" (don't ask why). In "The Specter of Tappington," a man is driven near to insanity because a ghost keeps stealing his pants. And then there's "The Niche of Doom" — a real treasure; one of the best non-supernatural horror stories radio has to offer. In "Niche," a man comes home to find his wife looking very guilty. When he asks if she has someone hiding in the closet, she says no. Because he trusts her so much, he takes her at her word and, instead of checking the closet, has it bricked up instead. A really great story with some fabulous acting!

### **The Haunting Hour (1944-1946)**

Another short-lived series, its introduction featuring clunky organ music and a tower clock striking two. I've found nothing particularly memorable in the few episodes I've heard, but it does make me wonder: if midnight is the witching hour, and two is the haunting hour, what is one o'clock? I welcome your opinions on this subject.

### **The Strange Dr. Weir (1944-1945)**

This fifteen-minute show is a member of the enormous "I wish I were the *Mysterious Traveler* or *Inner Sanctum*" club. Nothing



The folks at the First Generation Radio Archives were generous enough to provide readers of *The Spook* with a copy of one of the finest examples of old-time radio (OTR) horror — the first broadcast of “Three Skeleton Key” from the November 15, 1949 edition of *Escape*. You can download this show in either MP3 or Windows Media format via one of the links below (Windows users should right click the link, Macintosh users should control click it, and then choose to save the file to disk from the pop-up menu). NOTE: Because of file size concerns, these files are not in CD quality.

[13.5 MP3 File](#)  
[6.9 MB Windows Media File](#)

### The Scariest of OTR

Want to know what old-time radio collectors consider the scariest shows? Here is a top ten list from the folks at [www.old-time.com](http://www.old-time.com).

10. *Escape* “Power of Hammer”
9. *The Shadow* “The Gibbering Thing”
8. *Escape* “The Thing at the Top of the Stairs”
7. *Escape* “Evening Primrose”
6. *Hall Of Fantasy* “Idol of Krom Kroc”
5. *Mysterious Traveler* “Behind the Locked Door”
4. *Suspense!* “Dead Earnest”
3. *Quiet Please* “The Thing on the Fourble Board”
2. *Suspense!* “House in Cypress Canyon”
1. *Suspense!* “Three Skeleton Key” W/Vincent Price

particularly memorable and, as one commentator put it, “the stories sound like they were written by third graders.”

### The Sealed Book (1945)

A solid show, *The Sealed Book* was produced as a summer replacement for *The Shadow* and there are about two dozen episodes available. Stories ranged from supernatural terror to more mundane terrors, and are generally all of good quality. None of the episodes I’ve heard stand out among the others, however.

### Murder at Midnight (1946-1947)

Another horror anthology, this one with a theme that you can probably guess from its title. The show’s theme song, a raw string of organ notes, is both simple and annoying. The stories are better than those of many shows of this type, with a couple of real standouts. In particular I enjoyed “Ape Song,” in which a killer slowly turns into an ape. The actor who played the killer did an excellent job of changing his voice over the course of the transformation, making the whole thing much creepier than it would have been otherwise.

### The Hermit’s Cave (?-1947)

This show was one of many that parroted *The Inner Sanctum*. Unlike *Sanctum*, however, it focused on tales of the truly supernatural. Unfortunately, the show’s narrator — the hermit himself — comes off as just plain silly instead of creepy, and some of the stories are so old that their surprises are well known or so bad that they deserve to be forgotten.

For example, one show, “The Black Band,” retells the over-told story of a woman who has a ribbon around her neck which her husband isn’t allowed to remove (and when he does, her head falls off — there, I’ve spoiled the ending). From the overly implausible side of things, “The Vampire’s Desire” relates a series of occurrences in an old house which are so strange that the hero deduces there must be a vampire at work. Unfortunately, there are so many other possible explanations for the odd happenings that, at least in my mind, the hero has to be a bit daft to jump right to the existence of supernatural blood-drinkers. The one redeeming quality of this show is that it is sufficiently campy to entertain those who enjoy “just the right kind of bad.”

### Mystery in the Air (1947)

Truly some of the best radio horror. Of the thirteen episodes produced — all starring Peter Lorre — about half are known to have survived. Lorre has a fabulous voice for radio, and the stories interpreted here are carefully chosen to shown off Lorre’s ability to act maniacal. Among the best, “The Black Cat,” “The Lodger,” “The Horla,” and “Crime and Punishment.” This show should not be confused with 1953’s *Nightmare*, which was also largely hosted by Lorre but was not nearly of the same quality.

### Quiet Please (1947-1949)

A very interesting show, the best episodes of which are truly disturbing. So far as I know, every episode was written in the first person, which gives the stories an unusual immediacy. Combine this with a few episodes of *The Whistler* — which generally featured crime stories told in second person — and you’ve got all your verb types covered.

### Escape (1947-1954)

Now this is a series that is worth keeping an eye out for. Many people classify this as a horror show, although it also had a fair share of straight drama and the occasional bleak comedy (such as an excellent adaptation of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s “A Diamond as Big as the Ritz”). Other stories well adapted by *Escape*’s writers include Richard Connell’s “The Most Dangerous Game,” Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher,” H.G. Wells’ “The Country of the Blind” (among others), Carl Stephenson’s “Leinigen vs. the Ants,” Daphne DuMaurier’s “The Birds,” and a number of John Collier and Ray Bradbury pieces. The performance of Ambrose Bierce’s “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge” on *Escape* (and later on *Suspense*) is notable not only because it is well performed, but also because the writers had to add a number of scenes in order to fit their time slot. The added scenes are very well written and truly add to the story — a rarity in either radio or television.

Another very striking show, “Operation *Fleur de Lys*,” is more war drama than outright horror, but the ending is very striking. It stars Jack Webb as a World War II paratrooper in France who finds that a woman he is attracted to is an enemy of the resistance. This is supposedly based on a true story, which makes the ending all the more tragic.

*Escape* was also home to what may have been the best adaptation of a short horror story in radio history: “Three Skeleton Key.” This story of a lighthouse besieged by rats was such a sensation that it was eventually broadcast five times (three on *Escape*, two on *Suspense*). This is another case where the radio play surpasses its source material. I urge you to read the short story (included as part of this issue of *The Spook*) and then listen to the radio show (see the sidebar for download information). The radio version not only has greater depth of character, it also adds brilliant detail and a completely new, much more terrifying, ending. Although we are offering the original broadcast for download through our site, I encourage you to seek out *Escape*’s first encore performance of the show or its reincarnation on *Suspense*. These repeat performances feature Vincent Price in the starring role and are if anything superior to the original.

#### **The Unexpected (1951)**

Little, 15-minute stories, each of which has a “twist” ending that a modern, skeptical, literate audience will have guessed before the half-way mark.

#### **The Black Mass (1960-1963)**

This British series is not one of the most memorable. It largely relied on classic tales, and sounds more like a production that someone was coerced into putting on than a labor of love. One of the few notable episodes is an adaptation of Lovecraft’s “The Rats in the Walls,” which is (are?) certainly worth hunting down.

#### **Macabre (1961-1962)**

Unreadable motives, impossible situations, meaningless endings — what more could you ask for in a radio show. I’ve only heard two episodes of this show, but that was enough. In “Final Resting Place,” a newlywed couple is driving along on their honeymoon when they hear over the car radio that a homicidal maniac has escaped. They stop at a small town where a carnival has taken place, and not having paid attention to every other show in history which starts with the announcement of a maniac on the loose, the new husband allows a circus sideshow man to bury him alive for five days at \$100 a day, leaving his bride vulnerable. I won’t reveal the shocking, surprise ending, but I will say that I can’t imagine a real human ever acting like one of the characters in this show.

The other episode I listened to, “Weekend,” wasn’t much better. Or, to be more accurate, it wasn’t any better at all. In this show, an obviously eccentric (to put it nicely) invites a bunch of his students to his island for the weekend. There is no mention on how he can afford his own island on a college professor’s salary, but I suppose we can assume teachers got better pay back then. Once everyone is on the island, the doctor gives each of his guests different doses of a drug to see who will overdose. He seems to believe that only one person will overdose, although logic dictates that everyone who had more than the lethal amount should probably bite the dust — some doctor. An overdose of the drug first turns your fingernails blue and then transforms you into anything you imagine. On a scale from one to ten, I’d say that this show is about as scientifically rigorous as the average episode of *Sanford and Son*.

#### **Other series**

There are several other series which, although not horror, delivered the shocks from time to time. A partial list includes:

- *Academy Award Theater* (1946) which produced adaptations of popular films, including “Suspicion” with Cary Grant.

- *Arch Oboler’s Plays* (1939-1940) often included the tense and depressing, such as a particularly grim version of “Johnny Got His Gun” (which is partially ruined by the fact that one can’t broadcast a true Morse S.O.S. as part of a radio show).

- *Dimension X* (1950-1951) was a science fiction show, but included adaptations of “Almost Human” by Robert Bloch, many Ray Bradbury stories, and other works that would be of interest to horror fans.

- *Dragnet* (1949-1957) broadcast two shows which are high on my list of most disturbing things I’ve ever listened to. One, December 6, 1951’s “The Big Canary” deals with the murder of a 16-year-old girl’s mother and has an extremely depressing twist near the end. More depressing still, September 29, 1953’s “The Big Try” involves an attempt by Friday to stop a Nazi concentration camp survivor from killing himself instead of risking being sent to prison for passing bad checks.

- *Lux Radio Theater* (1934-1955) was another venue for film adaptations. Its World War II version of “The Canterville Ghost” with Margaret O’Brien and Charles Laughton is worth listening to, if only to see how thoroughly an excellent piece of

fiction can be ruined in rewrite. On the other hand, Ingrid Bergman and Charles Boyer are quite excellent in “Gaslight.”

- Orson Welles’ *Mercury Theater of the Air* (1938) is famous for its broadcast of that “don’t run outside and kill your neighbors, it’s just a radio show” classic, “The War of the Worlds.” For the record, this was not a hoax — as it is sometimes portrayed — since anyone who has listened to the actual broadcast knows that Welles had no intention of actually fooling his audience into believing they were listening to anything but a radio play. The *Mercury Theater* also ran versions of “Dracula” and “The Thirty-Nine Steps.”

- *X Minus One* (1955-1958) was another science fiction show which occasionally ran tales of horror — again, often by Ray Bradbury. May 8, 1955’s “Mars is Heaven” contains a fascinating segment of dialogue along the lines of: “My family was gassed to death in the Dachau prison camp.” “Oh my, that’s too bad.” “Well, it has its advantages.”

#### **Where to find them**

There are a number of places where you can get the shows I’ve described here. Although a huge number of them are available as MP3 downloads from various sites around the Internet or on massive collections for sale on eBay, I would suggest that you look carefully at the source before spending any money. There are plenty of individuals and businesses passing around badly made, high generation, inaccurately labeled old time radio shows. The price may be right, but the quality usually stinks and in many cases the legality is dubious.

I recommend two sources for high-quality shows: Radio Spirits ([www.radiospirits.com](http://www.radiospirits.com)), a commercial producer of OTR tapes, takes pains to secure the rights to the shows it reproduces and does an excellent job of cleaning them up. I also recommend that you spend \$15 to join the First Generation Radio Archives ([www.radioarchives.org](http://www.radioarchives.org)). This non-profit organization raises money to purchase and preserve original recordings of radio shows. Their recordings are of the highest possible quality, often surpassing the quality of the shows as they would have been heard over the radio when originally broadcast.~

*Dominick Cancilla is an author and OTR maniac with a great love for Jack Benny and a near obsession with Jack Webb. His first novel is due out in December.*