

“Welles,” Belles, and Fred Allen’s Sonic Pranks: Making a Radio Auteur Laugh at Himself

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Abstract

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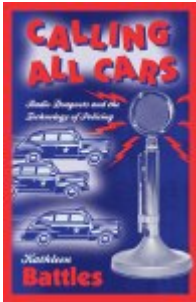
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Welcome back to **From Mercury to Mars**, our series of posts (in conjunction with [Antenna](#)) that reflect on Orson Welles’s radio career, and the upcoming anniversary of its highlight, “The War of the Worlds.”

When scholars discuss the effect of that play on people, they often fall into reveries about its most serious dimensions — what the Martian Panic says about human susceptibility, about the power of the media, about sound and the unknown. But it’s important to realize that, besides being terribly humorless, this approach also isn’t historically just. Although Welles was — like some of his listeners — spooked the night of the event, in the days that followed he and many others came to recognize some humor in the the whole thing, too. Later in life, Welles focused on that dimension of his memory, repeatedly recalling with laughter that when the actor John

Barrymore (something of a “grand old man” of the American stage in 1938), heard the Martian invasion broadcast he tearfully decided to free his beloved dogs, so they could taste freedom before meeting the inexorable doom.



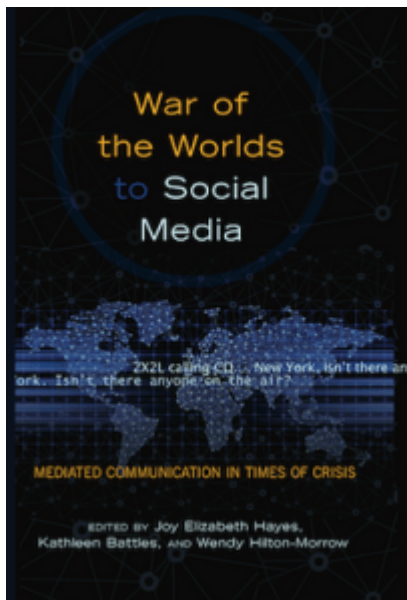
Such tall tales aren’t trivial. Actually, we misunderstand the WOTW escapade if we don’t recognize that immediately adjacent to modern America’s propensity for panic stood its equally fascinating capacity to laugh at itself. Both tendencies do cultural work, often in concert with one another. With that in mind, this week our **Mercury to Mars** series moves from the macabre (see Debra Rae Cohen’s [piece](#) on Welles and *Dracula*) to the ridiculous, focusing on the relationship between Welles’s puffed-up fame and how it was lampooned by [Fred Allen](#), one of the great absurdist comics in modern entertainment, and perhaps the most creative [radio comedian](#) of his era.

To introduce this crucial entertainer and to explain why his relationship to Welles matters so much, we are lucky to have one of the most important voices in radio studies today: [Kathleen Battles](#), Associate Professor of Communication at Oakland University, author of a paradigm-shifting study of the relationship between radio and policing, [Calling All Cars: Radio Dragnets and the Technology of Policing](#) (Minnesota, 2010). Battles is also one of the co-editors of a book you should all be reading, assigning, and handing out like Halloween candy — [War of the Worlds to Social Media: Mediated Communication in Times of Crisis](#) (Peter Lang, 2013).

Here’s a taste, just to get you started.

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Contemporary public memory of Orson Welles seems bent on remembering him as mercurial, imperious, haughty genius, driven in equal parts by ambition and artistic vision. It is hard to remember that this image of the auteur – not Welles but “Welles” – was one crafted not by the man alone, but by a host of actors and other performers, all with their own interest in attaching themselves to such a “genius.” As Welles’s reputation grew in the wake of the “War of the Worlds” broadcast, furthering his transformation into “Welles,” it was simply a matter of time before he became a fodder for another kind of auteur, the radio comedian. One of the most popular was Fred Allen, who made a career archly satirizing the cultural conventions of the day, with the radio industry itself being one of his favorite targets. “Welles” was too rich a subject to forego.

This post explores two key moments of Allen’s satire. The [first](#) came on November 9, 1939, when Allen’s show featured a comic skit, entitled “The Soundman’s Revenge, or, He Only Pulled the Trigger a Little, Because the Leading Man was Half Shot Anyway,” a radio skit that deftly mimes the Mercury/Campbell style to comic effect. The [second](#) is from three years later, October 18, 1942, when Welles himself appeared on Allen’s show, joining in the fun as the pair rehearse *Les Misérables*, with Welles gamely mocking “Welles.” In these two short skits, Allen and his team of writers and performers quickly dismantle what had become the more recognizable elements of the Mercury/Campbell style—as exemplified in Welles’s version of *A Tale of Two Cities*—including the elevation of Welles to the genius “author” of the plays, its narrative and performance techniques, and the use of sound effects.



Orson Welles as Mr. Arkadin in his film of the same name, 1955.

Mercury Theater was strongly marked with the authorial imprint of the real Welles, but the legend of “Orson Welles” was also crafted quite deliberately by CBS, and then later by show sponsor Campbell’s Soup, for their own aims at cultural legitimacy. As Michele Hilmes [argued](#), such moves were key to legitimizing the medium as operating in the “public interest” (183-88). Here is a clip from just after Campbell Soup began sponsoring the Welles program:

<https://soundstudiesblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/rebecca1.mp3>

As other writers have pointed out, such as Debra Rae Cohen in her [entry](#) to this series, [Neil Verma](#), and [Paul Heyer](#), the show was among the best in emphasizing the sonic properties of radio to maximum effect in storytelling. The quality acting of members of the Mercury Theater, the music of Bernard Herrmann, the ambitious use of sound effects, and some stellar examples of adapting literary tales make the show worthy of praise.

The emotional and narrative power of Welles himself is evident in the Mercury Theater dramatization of *A Tale of Two Cities*. Taking on Dickens’ sprawling classic in one hour certainly demanded some creative choices. One was to open with Dr. Mannette’s letter from the Bastille prison, with Welles as Mannette emotionally dictating the words that would later serve to betray his own family.

<https://soundstudiesblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/manette-letter-1.mp3>

This is contrasted against the later reading of the same letter in a courtroom scene, where the emotional poignancy of Welles’s performance is counterpointed against its dry reading as a piece of evidence.

<https://soundstudiesblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/manett-trial.mp3>



The sound effects team from The March of Time in a 1930's publicity photo. On the left is Ora Nichols, who would later develop sounds for The War of the Worlds.

Dynamic use of sound effects was another key element of the Mercury/Campbell style. From his work in *March of Time* and *The Shadow*, which both used sound effects to enact key narrative devices (*Time* varied times and locations, the Shadow's invisibility), Welles used his own radio program to push the boundaries of what such effects could achieve. In *A Tale of Two Cities*, sound effects are used to punctuate key moments, none to greater effect than the final scene in which the sound of the guillotine serves as the morbid backdrop to Carton's final, famous speech of self sacrifice:

<https://soundstudiesblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/guillotine-sequence.mp3>



Cover art for “Fred Allen Looks at Life,” a 1971 vinyl release by Bagdad Records.

All of these tendencies are key to Allen’s “Soundman’s Revenge,” in which Orson Welles and the *Campbell’s Playhouse* become “Dorson Belles” and “Finnegan’s Playhouse,” with the evening’s entertainment an adaptation of Jack and Jill fetching a pail of water.

Belles, acted by Fred Allen, tells his listeners that “My program is famous, and rightly so, for my sound effects, conceived in solitude by me.” The skit reaches ridiculous heights during a dramatization of “Jack’s” first meeting with “Jill.” As Jack and Jill wax enthusiastically at each other merely by repeating each others’ names, the host breaks in to tell listeners that “This dialogue, ladies and gentleman, is not to be found in the original Mother Goose version. It has been interpellated by Dorson Belles. We return you now to the play.”

<https://soundstudiesblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/soundmans-revenge.mp3>

The always potential high culture pretentiousness of Mercury/Campbell aesthetic choices are brought to the fore by the ridiculous choice of a Mother Goose nursery rhyme as the “play” within the skit. But other things do as well. The skit opens in typical Mercury first person narrative style, where Jack tells the tale from his own perspective in a ponderous, overwrought dramatic fashion. Jack does not live in postcard ready New England, he lives in a “land of penury and misery.” He does not merely make a mess while preparing his dinner, but “licks the albumen of owl’s egg off his fingers.”



In its most pointed reference to Mercury style, the skit directly plays off a memorable moment in *War of the Worlds* when, as Professor Pierson narrates his travels in New Jersey, he states that “I saw something crouching in a doorway, and it rose up and became a man. A man armed with a large knife.” Here is the clip:

<https://soundstudiesblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/i-saw-a-man.mp3>

In similar dramatic style, Jack narrates his journey up the hill, hauling his “heavy oaken pail” and asks “What was that huddled form crouching in my path? Was it a girl? It was!”

The comic tour-de-force, however, comes with its satire of sound effects. Allen’s team goes for broke as listeners laugh along to the gradual undoing of the hapless Theodore Slade, Welles’s sound effects engineer in the skit, who is driven to madness by the excessive number of effects. Slade makes many mistakes throughout, but his errors really add up when Jack kills his father and he describes the “long arm of the law” reaching out, coming from the north on horseback, the east by train, the west by “aeroplane,” and the north by sleigh. Each description is punctuated by its appropriate sound; hooves, whistles, engines, and of course, sleigh bells.

It works the first time, but when Jack dramatically asks if he and Jill can escape each of these modes of capture, Slade plays the wrong effects. When Jack tells us he stabbed the Sherriff, Slade plays a gunshot. This time, when Belles chastises him, Slade lets loose, telling Belles that he is going “nuts,” then trying to rectify the mistake by killing the Sherriff again. Belles yells out that “this is confusing!” to which Slade retorts, “you’re telling me!” As Jill tries to continue the scene, telling us she is shooting herself, Slade plays the train whistle. Finally Jack narrates that Jill, the Sherriff, and his father are dead, and that “I alone live.” Slade replies, “yeah, but not for long,” and after listing off years worth of complaints, shoots Belles. Belles, in a pitch perfect rendition of Welles’s weekly closing of his radio show, says “This is Dorson Belles, signing off permanently. Pending rigor mortis, I remain, obediently yours.”



*Fred Allen on the
cover of Time,
April 7, 1947. Art by
Ernest Hamlin
Baker.*

Perhaps Welles was offended, or perhaps he yearned to be in on the joke. He certainly seemed to relish the chance for that opportunity, when he [appeared](#) as a guest on Allen’s show, 3 years later

on October 18, 1942. Here he plays along in the skewering of his own genius image, tied to his authorial control over all his projects. As the cast nervously awaits the arrival of the great “Welles,” Allen tries to calm them. Once “Welles” enters the studio, Allen himself comes in for his own ribbing. “Welles” tells him that they will be performing a new version of one of Welles’s early radio dramatizations, *Les Miserables*. Here Welles successfully mocks both “Welles” and Allen, insisting on sole authorship, giving an overwrought performance, using the first person singular mode of delivery, and most humorously by reducing Allen’s contribution to a few sound effects.

In those few moments where Welles himself cannot help from laughing along with the mockery, “Welles” becomes Welles, and we in the audience get to laugh with, not at, the man.

While CBS, Campbell Soup, and the press turned Welles into “Welles,” Allen undermined that move, puncturing the grandiose myth, a project in which Welles himself was only too willing to participate. By breaking it down to its constituent elements, the “Soundman” and *Les Miserables* skits celebrate the unique style of the Mercury/Campbell radio productions. Yet, they also pierce its cultured veneer by pointing to the unsung efforts of the always-necessary team to make radio performances work, and skewering the pretentiousness of the program’s extra-textual discourses. In the process Welles and Allen mutually constructed and deflated each other’s reputation as radio geniuses.



Orson Welles as Falstaff in his Chimes at Midnight, 1965.

Featured Image: Orson Welles and Anthony Perkins sharing a laugh on the set of *The Trial*.

Kathleen Battles is Associate Professor and Graduate Director in the Department of Communication and Journalism at Oakland University (MI not CA). She is recently co-editor (with Joy Hayes and Wendy Hilton-Morrow) of *War of the Worlds to Social Media: Mediated Communication in Times of Crisis* (Peter Lang, 2013), a volume that seeks to draw connections between the War of the Worlds broadcast event and contemporary issues surrounding new media. She is also the author *Calling All Cars: Radio Dragnets and the Technology of Policing* (University of Minnesota Press, 2010). Her research interests include Depression era radio cultures, the interrelationship between radio, telephones, and automobiles, media and space/time, the historical continuities between “old” and “new” media, and contemporary issues surrounding sexuality and the media.



Want to catch up on the **Mercury to Mars** series?

[Click here](#) to read Tom McEnaney’s thoughts on the place of Latin America in Welles’s radio work.

[Click here](#) to read Eleanor Patterson’s reflections on recorded re-releases of the “War of the Worlds” broadcast.

[Click here](#) to read Debra Rae Cohen’s thoughts on vampire media in Orson Welles’s “Dracula.”

And [click here](#) to read Cynthia B. Meyers on the challenges and rewards of teaching WOTW in the classroom.

While I’ve still got you here ... be sure to join our [WOTW anniversary Facebook group](#). Next month we’re planning exciting events around the anniversary of the Martian Panic on October 30, 2013 from 7-10 EST, and hoping to get as many of you as we can to liveTweet the Invasion broadcast. Sign up to join in!